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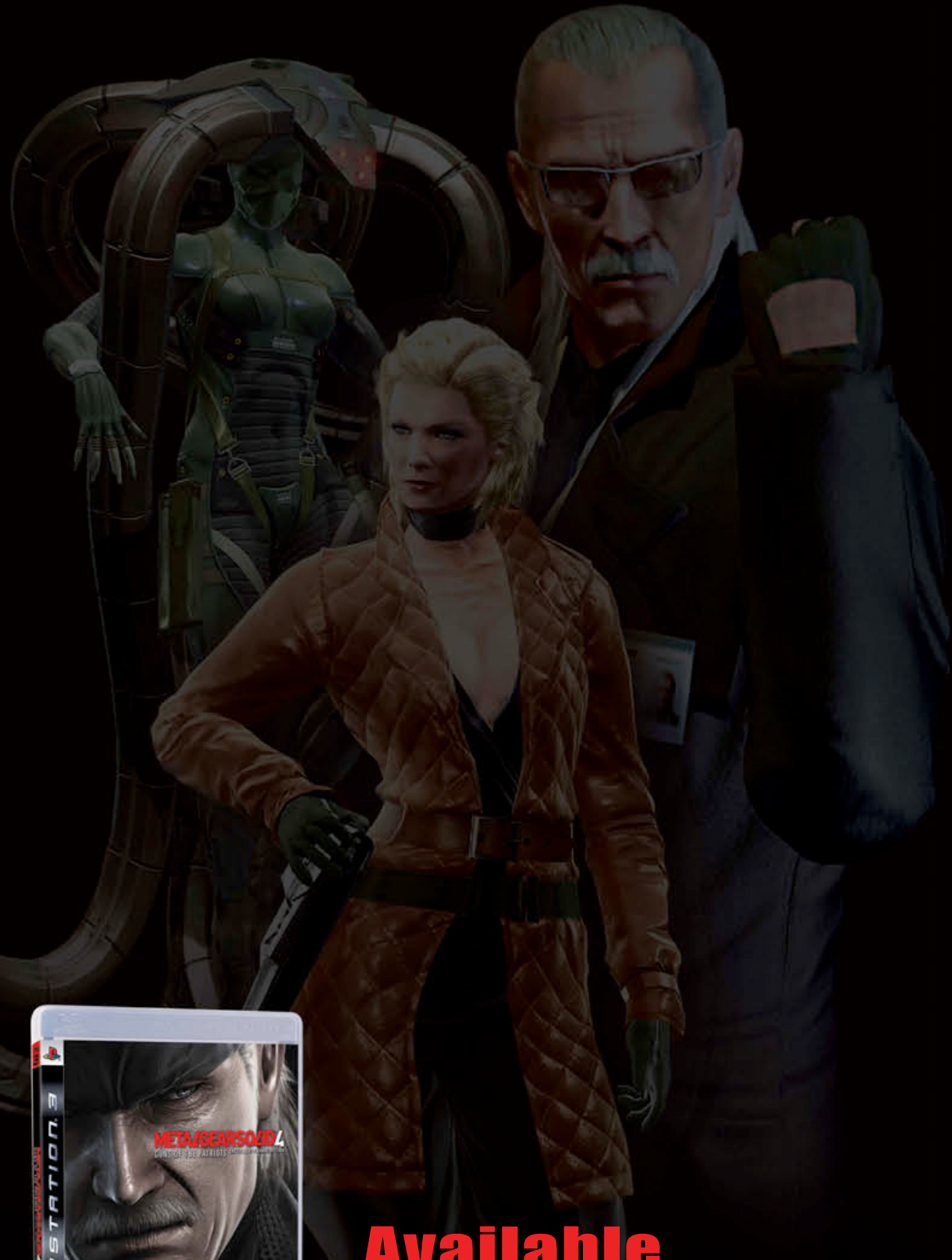
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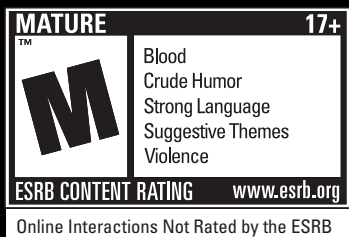
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Fun with numbers

The mail I got in regards to the topic of dropping scores altogether in our reviews section didn't seem to agitate that many people. There were very few threats along the lines of, "I'm cancelling my subscription," "I'll never buy your magazine again," "What's the point of reading a videogame magazine without scores, it's all over."

Come on people, where's all the vitriolic mail? Maybe it's not as much fun in the Internet age to tell people off in private, saving such satisfactions for open forums where ripping people apart is more like a game, with both sides vying for the chance to feel like they have a righteous place on our fine, massive planet. But I regret to inform the side that loves a traditional scoring system for videogames: you lose this month.

Obviously it's a bit of a shock to browse our review section and see nothing but articles with no final, definitive, etched-in-stone stamp of any sort. This month, that's the way it is, but we're not about to just end it with that. For a number of reasons, it made sense to pull the plug and take more time to really discuss where we want to evolve this whole reviews system dilemma.

So for now, see if you can come to grips with reading, say, the Mario Kart Wii review, finding some discussion in the fact that a game could be a ton of fun while still stumbling over plenty of touchy areas that plenty of avid gamers will find unacceptable. I could give that game the highest mark known to mankind's grading scale, confident that I've been having that much of a good time with it. The

second I place that score, the discussion devolves from any interesting debate about a flawed game still capturing pitch-perfect joy, to a diatribe on why the author's opinion is worthless.

Let's talk about the games, not the review. And for those who inevitably get mad that we've decided to do away with the traditional grading system, that's actually a challenge to us: make a magazine where the reviews are pretty much irrelevant in the end. Or at least where the reviews aren't such a misguided focus.

Changes are coming in the way we do things. Next month you'll see what I'm talking about, along with a far more lucid look into the problem with game reviews in general, as told through the lens of someone who is much more gifted with words than I am. It may be a topic with no logical conclusion in sight, but those are sometimes the best topics to tackle, and these are the things I want to read in Play.

But enough about reviews, let's talk about Mario Kart Wii some more, shall we? Some people will argue that the games industry tries to take what we do too seriously, that we're wanting to ascribe more value to the craft than is genuinely present. I would like to believe (and *believe* is the key word) that games are on their way to becoming fully accepted as art, but until then, I'm Ok with the medium being *fun*. Mario Kart Wii is a kind of fun that is terrific fun. I know the game is being scorned by some, and I see where you're coming from, but I also am not affected by the same things that destroy the experience

"But enough about reviews, let's talk about Mario Kart Wii some more, shall we?"

for you. What I experience is validation for why I still play games after years of obsession. If that makes my opinion off base, I'm Ok with that, because while you're hating, I'm seeing a piece of my life in a little better place for the few hours I'm online battling with my friends. I'm not quite sure how to responsibly score that emotion just yet, but maybe next month I'll have a better idea. Hope you'll be back to find out.

—Brady Fiechter

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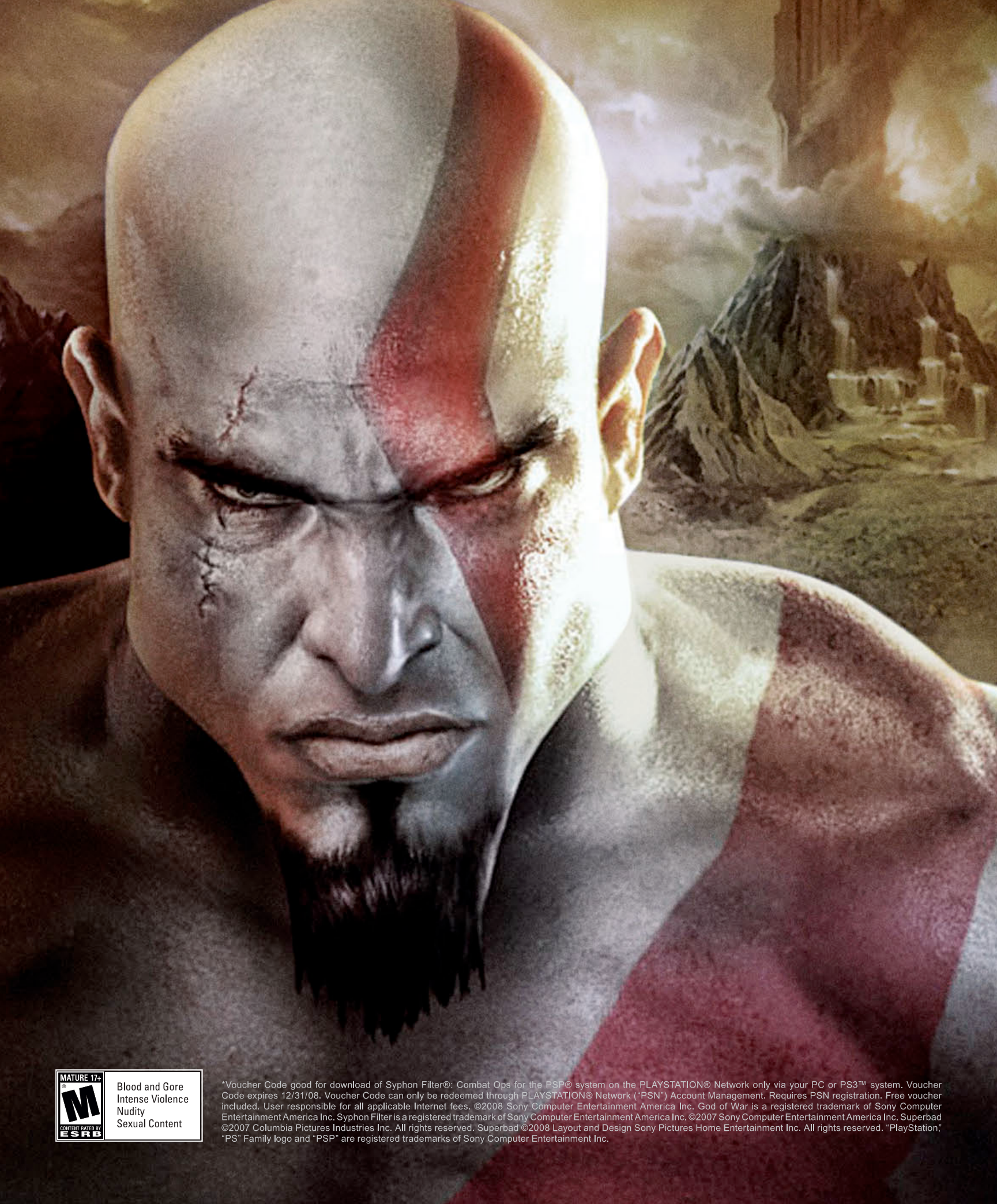
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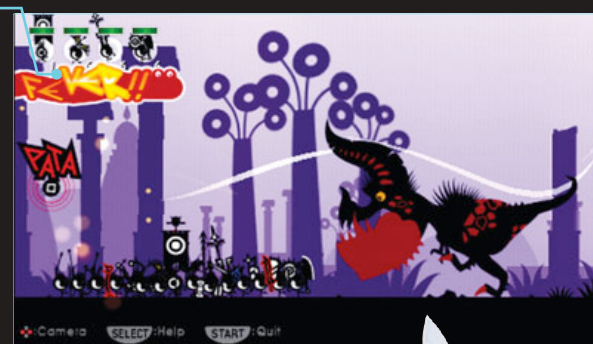


► Attack of the handhelds...

This month we take a look at the portable systems' best sellers, and as usual there are few head scratchers, especially on DS where it's one thing to see Mario and Sonic: Olympic Games ahead in the top spot ahead of Zelda, but My Sims and BABYZ? We don't even know what BABYZ is. Mario and Sonic is also the only ranked game that released this year... Things are looking pretty normal on the PSP front, where God of War and Crisis Core are fighting for the top spot and it's great to see Patapon at number 6. The PSP is obviously more the gamer's system with the DS doing the family honors, just like Reggie said!

Year to Date Top 10 selling PSP games

01	God of War: Chains of Olympus	Sony
02	Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII	Square Enix
03	GTA Vice City Stories	Take 2 Interactive
04	GTA Liberty City Stories	Take 2 Interactive
05	Need for Speed carbon: Own the City	EA
06	Patapon	Sony
07	Madden NFL 08	EA
08	Midnight Club 3: DUB	Take 2 Interactive
09	SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals Fireteam Bravo 2	Sony
10	MLB '08 The Show	Sony



Year to Date Top 10 selling Nintendo DS games

01	Mario and Sonic: Olympic Games	Sega of America
02	Mario Party	Nintendo of America
03	New Super Mario Bros.	Nintendo of America
04	Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day	Nintendo of America
05	Mario Kart	Nintendo of America
06	Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day	Nintendo of America
07	Imagine: BABY	Ubisoft
08	Pokemon Diamond Version	Nintendo of America
09	My Sims	EA
10	Legend of Zelda Phantom Hourglass	Nintendo of America



LETTER OF THE MONTH

Scoring the scores...

I just read the latest Play magazine issue's (May 2008) Letter from the Editor about dropping Game Review Scores. And as Brady surmised, this letter is talking about one angle versus the other. First off, I want to say Play is the ONLY magazine I still get a subscription to in this day and age of instant Internet feedback and online game sites for reviews, etc. That's how much I respect and enjoy reading Play. However, dropping game review scores would be a pretty significant loss, IMHO, and here's why:

As unfair or difficult as it may be to give the totality of years of work on a videogame a numerical score, a numerical score is a valuable, multipurpose component that many people refer to in the end. For some people, the game review score is their quick reference to help guide them in buying a game, when they don't have time and/or don't want to read the whole review. In this day and age of IMing, Internetspeak/shorthand (OMGWTFBQB, BRB, AFK, etc.), it's sad but true that there are just people out there that won't read entire blocks/pages of text, and just want the "bottom line" now. You may not agree with it (and I don't, either), but I see it all the time with coworkers, friends, and even family friends' kids when they browse an Internet gaming site and see a review (they read like the first few sentences and then jump to the review score).

For those that read the entire reviews, game review scores are a convenient and important way to understand just how [insert adjective "great"/"good"/"bad"] a game really is. Looking at a basic example, let's say in the next issue (with no scores), one game is a "good game." And then a review of another game in that issue is also a "good game." What's the difference? Sure, reading the review in-depth will certainly help someone understand why XYZ game is "good" and what the reviewer liked, and why ABC game is also "good," but then what? For better or worse (and you may not agree with it), people DO look to the game review score to help understand which game is "better" or "worse" than another. Scores help people assess the level of [adjective] a game is by itself (an "8.0 good game" versus a "8.5 good game") and across multiple games.

The argument has been made before that "Well, it may not be the same reviewer reviewing the various games you're comparing, so it's all subjective anyway and thus numerical scores are moot." It's true that Heather's 9.0 may not mean the same thing as Nick's 9.0, but I think that's one reason why I (and many of my friends) enjoy reading Play: We believe that Play has assembled a team of individual but intelligent, dedicated, hardcore gamers that still have the same high-quality standards and get what "great games" are all about. And since your entire Play staff are dedicated, intelligent hardcore gamers and have a similar philosophy and care-about for great games, for us, it's OKAY then and helpful to see that Nick gave XYZ game a 9.5, but this other game Greg scored a 6.0. I still find some use in that because I know what

Nick and Greg are like, I've read their body of reviews over the years, and together as part of the great Play magazine review staff, I feel more confident about their principals and goals as a team than any other competitor's review staff (which are so disparate and incongruous in their individual beliefs or what they nitpick that it's annoying).

In conclusion, I hope that Brady, Dave, and Play reconsider dropping game review scores. You may be "tired" of giving out scores, but as paying customers and just what a segment of the population want, the Play review scores are helpful and needed. Just as restaurant reviews and hotel reviews have scores, they are meant to help the paying customer decide. You see a review for a hotel along the beach in Hawaii. It is right on the beach and has a great view. You read another review of a hotel next door that also is right on the beach and has a great view. What's the difference? I know Brady is a wordsmith, and I appreciate the written word and reading (gasp!) as much as the next person, but I also enjoy the final Play review score as a final arbiter and a way to better understand the value of the product. You can only use "this game is good," "this game is greatness," "this game is enjoyable" so many times before people start wanting more refinement and a better understanding of just how good one game is versus another good game. And lastly, not all of us can afford every game that comes out. Some of us look to Play magazine to help in our purchasing decisions. That review score IS helpful when deciding on which game to pick up. I'll still enjoy reading your reviews, but it'll be a great loss and a disservice to portions of the Play audience if you drop the review score permanently.

Thanks for your time,
Ken

I hope Play adds audience-specific scoring. One of the downsides of most reviews is that the games are played through the eyes of hardcore gamers (what else do you call someone who plays games for a living?). Offering multiple verdicts would help. Mario Party might get a "Playing with friends?: Thumbs Up; Looking for hardcore action?: Thumbs Down". Likewise, an RPG might appeal to hardcore RPG fans, but isn't accessible to everyone else. Or maybe the reviewer personally fell in love with a game despite its flaws; that shouldn't keep a game from getting a Thumbs Up, even if it's "People named Eric L. Patterson: Thumbs Up; Fighting game fans: Thumbs Even; Everyone else: Thumbs Down".

In the latest Play, the reviews for Monster Madness, Dark Sector, and Soma Bringer could have really used audience-specific verdicts. These "If you like X, you'll like this game" caveats are included in the text anyway; might as well break them out and highlight them.

Thanks, Ron



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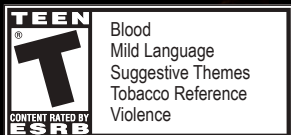
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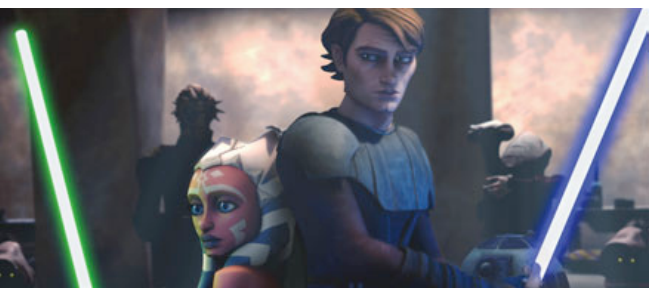
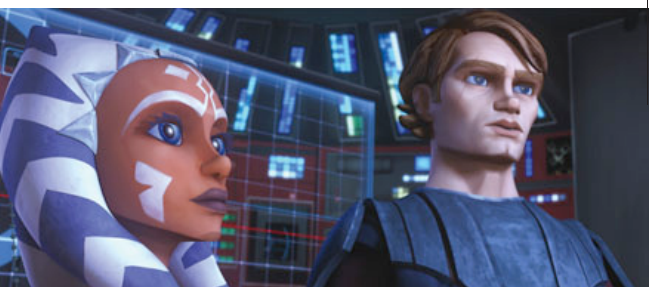
Star Wars returns in CGI! Heaven can wait

The Force comes to Cartoon Network!

As the intergalactic struggle between good and evil rages on, Sinister villains—led by Palpatine, Count Dooku and General Grievous—are poised to rule the galaxy, placing the fate of the Star Wars universe in the hands of the daring Jedi Knights... Beginning this fall, Cartoon network will begin airing the latest installment in the Star Wars franchise, *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, which will anchor their new Friday lineup along with *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*, *Ben 10: Alien Force*, and *The Secret Saturdays*. *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* is an entirely new original CGI series created by the artists at Lucasfilm Animation. Described as 30-minute “mini-movies,”

Anakin Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Padmé Amidala will be joined by brand-new heroes like Anakin’s padawan learner, Ahsoka, in a new story each week, delivering the Star Wars saga’s astonishing visual and extraordinary music like it’s never been experienced before. “I felt there were a lot more *Star Wars* stories left to tell,” said George Lucas, executive producer of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*. “I was eager to start telling some of them through animation and, at the same time, push the art of animation forward.” The only question that remains is when they’ll announce the game, because we all know that where there’s a new *Star Wars* series, there’s a new *Star Wars* game.

“I felt there were a lot more *Star Wars* stories left to tell.”- George Lucas



Ninja Theory says so-long to Nariko

In a recent reply to our query on the future of Heavenly Sword our source at Ninja Theory stated, “In short, we are no longer involved with Sony as we turned down the chance to work on anything related to Heavenly Sword (as Sony own the IP) so we’ve moved on to something we think is way more cool. Unfortunately, you will have to contact Sony regarding anything related to HS. It’s a shame really but we are looking forward to building something new and fresh.” So that’s all folks, at least where Ninja Theory is concerned. SCEA isn’t ruling out the possibility of a sequel although when and by who (along with if) remains to be seen.



Yo quero Taco Fu Play with your food!

Salutations to Blockdot, this year’s winner of Ad:tech’s prestigious People’s Choice Award for their saucy “arcade-style” game Taco Fu for Taco Bell’s web site (www.tacobell.com). Ad:tech announced Blockdot’s victory in the “Best Use of Rich Media” category—determined by a public vote from a list of finalists selected by an ad:tech panel of judges—at their San Francisco awards ceremony on April 15. In the game you must defend your Taco Bell food from hordes of masked Luchadors using your jump, punch, kick and if things really heat up, your trusty Fire Sauce Ball! To the victor goes the spoils, and we all know how rad those Taco Bell instant message icons and wallpapers are. Go play at www.kewlbox.com, or www.tacobell.com and save a taco today.



Oddity of the month...

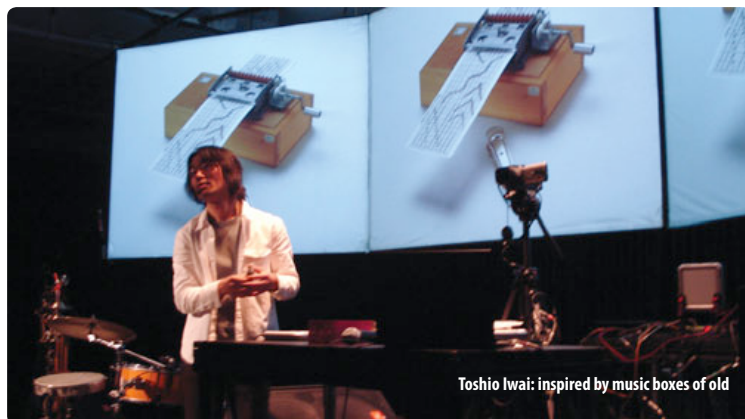
Red ring of doom slaying 360 revealed

We can’t find the email this was attached to, but you can figure it out right? We’re pretty sure it makes Cappuccino too.



Get your Tenori-On!

The ultimate robot rock star gadget arrives in North America



Toshio Iwai: inspired by music boxes of old

interview

Toshio Iwai

Media artist and co-creator of Tenori-On

Yu Nishibori

Supervisor, Center for Advanced Sound Technologies, Yamaha

play: You guys had been touring Tenori-On prototypes for a couple years, but the final design was first shown last September in the UK. What kind of interest have you seen since then, more on the artist side or regular consumers?

Yu Nishibori: It's been kind of half and half. For professional musicians, it's been a lot of underground people like the guys here at the event. There are some famous musicians that have it too, like Bjork.

I heard that. It's nice to know that she's still a gear hunter. I'm a big Four Tet fan and I see that he picked one up. Peter Gabriel has one too, right?

YN: Yeah. These kind of famous artists are very knowledgeable, so they went out and bought the Tenori-On themselves. We have a very interesting selection of artists. But it's not only these people; even non-musical people, just music fans and listeners, they tend to buy them too. The popular Tenori-On videos recently on YouTube, it's mostly non-pro performers.

Ah yes, like The Tenorions. People love these chicks!

[Enthusiastic nods] Yes, yes!

It's kind of cool that there's already a Tenori-On band. Have you seen any really impressive live stuff yet, like a roomful of people playing a Tenori-On symphony?

Toshio Iwai: Well, it was something a little different I was really impressed by. This group, they inputted letters and pictures and they got them to display like a video

image on the Tenori-On. And then they moved together to make words and digital graphics. It was one of the things that I didn't imagine for the Tenori-On, this graphics demonstration.

That's awesome. I guess once you figure out how to display it, it's not too difficult to program images for the 256 dot grid.

TI: Yeah, 16 x 16 is of course pretty easy to produce by computer, but even they are fascinated by the lighting and animation of the Tenori-On. It shows potential we didn't foresee.

It's probably the underground electronic musicians, like the guys at this launch event, that are getting the most out of the Tenori-On as a musical instrument?

TI: More and more, they are producing fantastic stuff. Sutekh (Seth Horvitz, SF-based producer) for example. I heard some of his stuff earlier...we were really amazed.

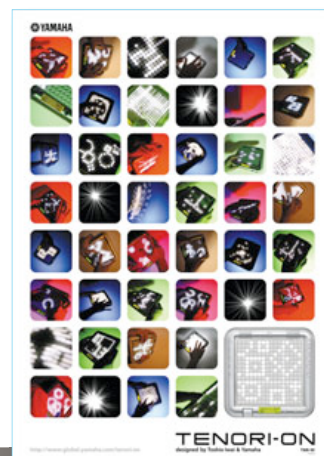
YN: These artists are really pioneering new music. As the creators of Tenori-On, having these kinds of people experiment with it really helps us to know its possibilities.

TI: I'm thinking that if we selected artists with, you know, sort of a fixed style, they might come back to us and say: "Hey, I wanted to make this type of music but I can't. What's wrong with your machine?" But these guys, they have a very flexible style and always look for new ideas. They say: "Oh, this is Tenori-On. I wonder what kind of interesting things I can do on this



The typical **play** reader is probably a guy or gal with complex interests: a cognoscente of games, media and art in many forms; an enthusiast of new technologies. The type of person that could happily disappear for hours at a time with a Tenori-On, lost in its grid of bouncing lights and rhythm.

The invention of renowned Japanese media artist Toshio Iwai (*Electroplankton*) in collaboration with Yamaha's Innovative Technology Division, the Tenori-On is a high end digital music instrument with a fascinating interface that's as interesting to watch as it is to operate. At the Tenori-On North American launch event in Montreal, **play** had an opportunity to try the device hands-on and speak to its globe-trotting creators, Toshio Iwai and Yamaha's Yu Nishibori.



With 256 touch play LEDs, a powerful tone generator, 16 layer sequencing, multiple effects processors, MIDI in/out, and 253 distinct preset synths and drums (or load your own samples via SD card), the Tenori-On is an electronic musician's magic tablet.



"I'd like to invent other instruments that can be played alongside the Tenori-On. You know, like a piano, guitar and drums go together, Tenori-On with a new device, playing sounds and lights together." - Toshio Iwai, media artist and Tenori-On co-designer.

Iwai's work ranges from massive media installations comprised of dozens of workstations, cameras, projectors and monitors, to the inimitable and diminutive cult hit Nintendo DS game *Electroplankton* (left). Themes of music and visual interactivity prevail, regardless of canvas.

Curious crowds flock to a Tenori-On demo station at Yamaha's posh Montreal launch event.



machine." So the Tenori-On influences their style, then their style influences the Tenori-On. It's a very interesting collaboration.

Do you see similar live techniques among these artists, in terms of how they're integrating the Tenori-On into their sets?

I think some of the artists are happy to just use the Tenori-On alone, but some like to combine it with their Macintosh, keyboards, even other Tenori-Ons. I really like to see this. I mean, if it was a games machine or something, it might be a new idea to combine several machines together, but it is a distinct musical instrument, so it should be natural. Actually, there's an Indian percussionist, Debashis Sinha, playing tonight during Robert Lippok's Tenori-On set. That's something very new, even for us.

(Later that evening the Lippok and Sinha set is outstanding: Rib-shaking melodic drones via the Tenori-On with intense live tablas, cymbals and snake rattles).

Toshio, you do a lot of events and big installations, but you've also created video games. Recently, people loved Electropunk on Nintendo DS. Do you enjoy game development?

Well, as a media artist, every time I'm trying to create new hardware, new interfaces, a new object. Making a game on a ready-made particular platform, it's mostly making

software. Compared to Tenori-On, which is much closer to creating entire artworks. Not just the software, but choosing the materials and construction as well. But I'm really satisfied with what I created for Electropunk. Maybe I'll get a chance to work on DS again, or possibly Wii.

Did you have to leave out any features for this version of the Tenori-On, something you'd like to try in a Tenori-On 2?

One thing I'd like for a Tenori-On 2, or a Super Tenori-On [laughs], would be even more functions. But there's something else I'd really like to do: I'd like to invent other instruments that can be played alongside the Tenori-On. You know, like a piano, guitar and drums go together, Tenori-On with a new device, playing sounds and lights together.

So you could have a touring band that uses only these instruments on stage, each member specializing with a device...

It would be really nice, everyone with their own machine, their own sounds and graphics playing together. This is my dream.

We're primarily a software-driven world though. Most users aren't that concerned with the box itself, so much as what software it's running.

It's true. You have maybe only Apple trying to create a very nice looking and unique interface; very convenient machines like MacBook or iPhone. With the Tenori-On I could have chosen an LCD with touch screen, but I didn't want to have such a thing. Too much like a tablet PC or DS. The most interesting point about real musical instruments is the combination of the hardware and interface. I wanted to keep that part of the experience of musical instruments.

You have a good partner in Yamaha. They've always championed innovative sound devices.

Yamaha creates traditional musical instruments with sound chips and very high tech stuff; I love that combination in a company. If I went to another company, maybe they would use just a plastic case and ordinary interface, but Yamaha knows what it is about a musical instrument that is so fascinating for people. The shape is very specific, the tactile feel is very important. The richness of the hardware and sound quality is very important.

It might be neat to have a Tenori-On equipped with a projector on the back, drawing images on the ceiling, walls...

The live Tenori-On experience: (Left) Nathan Michel demonstrates mad dexterity during his Tenori-On solo; (Right) Robert Lippok's Tenori-On rises above his console on a custom vertical stand; (Bottom) I Am Robot And Proud-a.k.a. Shaw-Han Liem-dual wielding a keyboard and Tenori-On.

Tenori-On: Hands-on
Music sounds better with you



The Tenori-On is a serious piece of music gear tempered by accessibility. The unit's aluminum magnesium frame oozes quality. The 16 x 16 matrix of high grade LED buttons has a fantastic tactile feel as you tap and draw notes into a song's timeline, and sequencing in different modes results in new light patterns across the front and back of the unit. It feels as though you are seeing and touching your music in the interface lights, sort of following your own bouncing ball. It lends this deep music composing tool a friendly intuitiveness that a child could grasp, and it provides a cool synchronized light show for fans at live performances.

We have thought about many things like that! I think now that the machine is out there, many people in the same industry will start to think about the next idea. It's like the iPhone; now people have started to think about mobile phones a new way. So I think already people are trying to imagine the next Tenori-On instrument.

It must be satisfying to know that people are inspired by the design. It's not like one of your exhibits that people

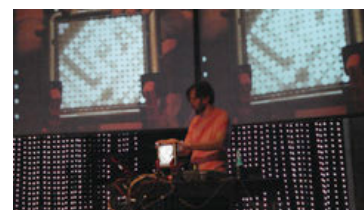
visit; they can appreciate this device anywhere.

As a media artist, not just creating installations for museums, I would like to influence people with Tenori-On; from children's creativity, to professional musicians, to product designers, computer scientists...so they start to think about meaningful experiences with digital technologies. I hope a lot of people buy a Tenori-On and start to share their song files with each other. This is the main reason why I wanted to design a real product, to realize this, something I couldn't do with one of my installations.

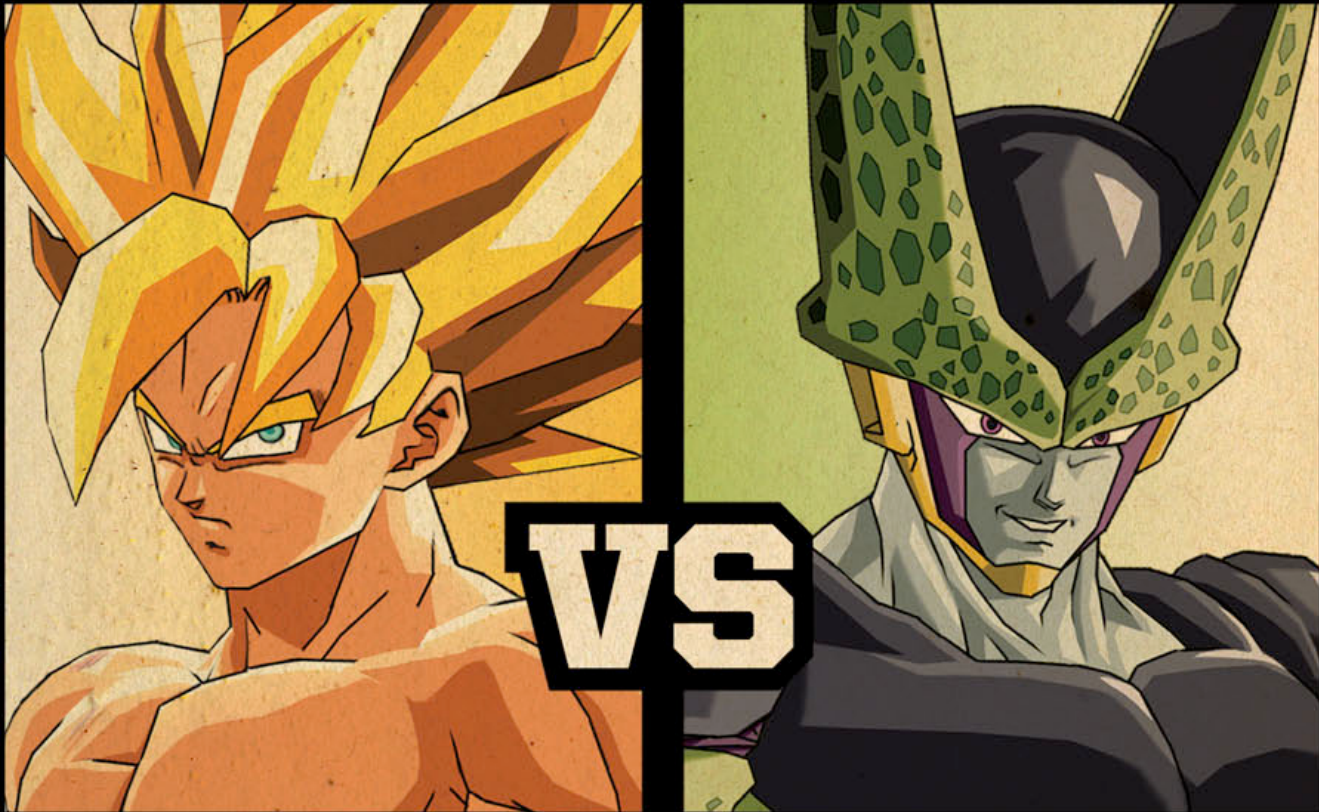
Thanks very much, Yu and Toshio.

"I would like to influence people with Tenori-On; from children's creativity, to professional musicians, to product designers, computer scientists..." - Toshio Iwai, media artist and Tenori-On co-designer

We'd also like to thank the Mutek (www.mutek.org) organizers for a great show. If you're going to be in the Montreal area between May 28th and June 1st, be sure to check-out the 2008 Mutek Festival. It's poised to be one of the year's biggest events in electronic music and digital creativity, with an absurdly good line-up of performers and panellists.



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PLAYSTATION 3



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MOTORSTORM: PACIFIC RIFT

Another perfect storm on the horizon

words Dave Halverson





the off-road festival that put the racing world on notice with its unmatched visual supremacy, groundbreaking course design, unparalleled physics, and bone-crushing cinematic destruction is bound for sequel glory—which begs the question: Can off-road racing get any better? Every PS3 owner knew the moment they laid eyes on *MotorStorm* (after changing their underwear) that a sequel was inevitable. Beyond the introduction of real-time terrain deformation amid multi-gender, multi-vehicle racing on multi-route tracks peppered with rocks, sheer cliffs, and crazy cambers, the racing was fraught with a previously unseen level of peril, piloting vehicles that depicted a refreshing mishmash of eras and classifications. With everything from big rigs to MX bikes on the same trajectory, *MotorStorm* was a recipe for maximum amusement, dialing in each vehicle and the most efficient line around the track while doing your best to avoid slow-motion calamities that often

ended with your rider's foot beside his or her head.

Aside from the obvious change of venue that had us on the lookout for wayward DOA hotties, one of the more significant gameplay enhancements in *Pacific Rift* is the many ways you can use the destructible environments to your advantage, along with a new level of combat and AI that analyzes the race and surroundings and reacts in the most realistic manner possible. Online races with up to 20 players are among the many PSN features along with extensive support over the long haul by way of downloadable content such as new themes, tracks, vehicles, and modes. Sixteen tracks among the island's emerald bays, lush jungles, and mountain peaks are a great place to start, but the promise of more is what the HD generation is all about. There are new trucks on tap too: Joining the cavalcade of ATVs, rally cars, buggies, bikes, race trucks, mud pluggers, and big rigs, the new monster truck class delivers the biggest vehicles yet.

"Every PS3 owner knew the moment they laid eyes on *MotorStorm* (after changing their underwear) that a sequel was inevitable."



Unfortunately (for us) the game was still too early for any hands-on gameplay (believe me, we begged) so after a brief demonstration that verifies their pact with the devil is still in good standing, we threw as many probing questions at Evolution as we could come up with...

MotorStorm: Pacific Rift

System(s)	PS3
Developer	Evolution Studios
Publisher	SCEA
Available	Fall

Interview
Evolution Studios

Interview

Evolution Studios

Answered by Nigel Kershaw and Paul Hollywood

"The riders conveyed a lot of the attitude of the first game, and they'll be doing more of the same in the second one.."

Setting out to develop your sequel, there was criticism of certain parts but raves about others, so a certain amount of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" must come into play. That said, there's always room for more of a good thing and the core structure was fairly simple. Was there a lot of R&D and back-and-forth on where you should take the series?

There are aspects of MotorStorm that, like you say, people got really excited about. We'd be foolish to get rid of those and MotorStorm, as a brand, has to have certain elements to distinguish it from the rest. So while we knew that we had to come up with all sorts of juicy new bits, we had to remain true to the MotorStorm DNA as well.

So, talk to us about the Island... Any volleyball hiding out? Are you introducing story elements?

The island's a great place. It gives us so much freedom to create some excellent tracks, simply because of the massive variety of different environments. We went on a trip to Hawaii, much like we did previously to Monument Valley for MotorStorm, and came back with a lot of references—photos and videos, mainly. Ask anyone who's been there, there's this amazing set of extremes there, from the beautiful beaches all the way up through jungle-type environments to huge volcanoes. But we're not straying too far from the racing, so don't expect a deep story line, or for that matter the

ability to purchase lipstick. This is another MotorStorm festival; people go there to race, party, and enjoy the vibe.

What kind of research goes into this level of off-road game? Do you go out and drive/ride the vehicles, watch racers, speak with pro racers...or are you more into making it feel like a game over a sim? What's your process?

People in the States might not know this, but we did a series of excellent official rally games on the PS2 before MotorStorm. So we have a fair history in off-road racing, and we own a Mitsubishi Evo, which is kept at the local racing circuit and is used by staff. However, this sort of game isn't a pure simulation—it's about close, brutal racing and being able to skid your bike

True or false: Dirt is a good source of protein.



Nigel Kershaw



Paul Hollywood



sideways through mud, dust, and grime at 100 miles an hour.

Are the male and female characters still generic or are you giving the characters identities? Any character creation going on?

Right now there's no character creation going on. We've seen some pages on the net talking about character creation and customization, but that's not the case. We deliberately keep the game really tight and focused on the racing—it's all about the vehicular combat rather than what color your shoes are.

That's a deal breaker. J What about any sort of shop to outfit your rider? Are you adding any sort of monetary system?

We had that sort of thing in mind for the first game, but we wanted to keep MotorStorm: Pacific Rift as simple as possible. Get into the race, have a blast, don't worry too much about the consequences, and emerge with a grin on your face.

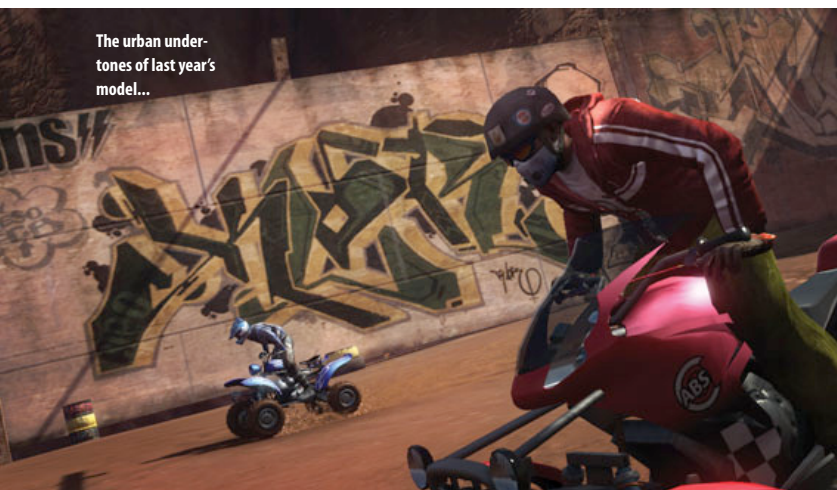
Where motorcycles are concerned, have you tweaked the rider animation/body English supercross-style, or tailored the animation to specific rider types?

We've completely redone the animation system, but we don't want to get too far from the spirit of MotorStorm. The riders conveyed a lot of the attitude of the first game, and they'll be doing more of the same in the second one. We don't want people to confuse us with a supercross game, because those games are





Evolution's strict no-action-figure policy keeps their minds on business.



The urban undertones of last year's model...



...against, hey! Isn't that Dennis Hopper?

generally more serious and more based on tidy racing rather than the dirty mess MotorStorm: Pacific Rift will generally end up with. Supercross games can be great, but as you know, this is MotorStorm. It's survival racing, and as such is completely different.

How about motorcycle and quad design: Similar or more extreme? You went hella retro/original in MS. Same kind of thing going on?

Yes and no. Our vehicles tend to be inspired by a range of real models, but not direct copies of any. But there are some vehicles in MotorStorm: Pacific Rift that are a bit more off-the-wall than in the previous title.

There was a tinge of combat in the first game. Are you building on it, keeping it the same, or getting rid of it?

It wouldn't be MotorStorm without a bit of friendly punching or helping a competitor ram into a wall. So we're definitely keeping it. And we've added one or two aspects, too, just for a bit of extra spice during the melee. We like our off-road racing to be brutal.

The video lets on that you're implementing some cause-and-effect obstacles. Is this a feature we'll find on every course or just sporadically?

Our courses are built to be individual, with their own character and challenge. This means that we don't want to have any single aspect repeated in every track, apart from spectacle and fun. Similarly, we don't want to have to crowbar any features into a track that wouldn't suit it. For MotorStorm: Pacific Rift, we are adding a much more interactive environment, with tons of vegetation and props that will be activated by the vehicles. The vegetation includes plants and branches that will snap and crack as the bigger vehicles run through and will alternately provide more obstacles for the smaller vehicles to avoid. So the cause-and-effect obstacles are something that we're using where it makes the most sense. Quality rather than quantity, we say!

Speaking of track design, one of the coolest aspects of the first game was the multiple lines and layers of each course. Can we expect more of the same?

You bet! That's integral to the whole MotorStorm experience, especially as we have such a diverse range of vehicle performances racing simultaneously. We put a great deal of thought into each track, and it takes a while to get them just right—there's lots of going backward and forward until everybody thinks the tracks are good enough. We set the bar really high for our tracks, and I think the players appreciate that.

How many courses does the island hold and how will each venue come into play? Are you using the same ticket/point/venue system or going with a new framework?

One of the aspects of the original



MotorStorm that we got questioned about most was why we only included eight tracks. Those eight tracks took some thorough design from our team, and each was massive and excellent in their own unique way. Each track had loads to explore, so they took a bit longer to learn than your normal racing circuit. But we understood what the consumers and media were saying, and we took it upon ourselves as a team to bring even more content to MotorStorm: Pacific Rift. So as a result, we are creating 16 tracks for this title.

As for the racing system, we use something not entirely different to the one in the previous game, but it does give the player a bit more freedom with regard to what race they want to attempt next.

Are certain courses only open to certain vehicles, like the last game, or are you opening things up?

Not all of the courses are suitable to every vehicle type. So we have shut some courses off from some vehicle types. But it's something that we do a lot of work on; it's certainly not an arbitrary decision.

Same amount of vehicle types or more?

More! We've kept the seven classes from before and added an eighth class: the monster truck. It's the star of the show, really. It's fast, strong, and dangerous, so you really don't want to have one right behind you in a race. Having said that, it can also be a handful when controlling it. But once you get used to it, you'll feel like a tornado as you tear through the field. We've also spent a lot of time rebalancing



the other classes, so even if you didn't like one particular type before, you'll find that it's worth revisiting to see how we've changed it.

Is the general control scheme the same? Gas on R2, boost on X, etc.? Anything new planned?

There are one or two new bits, yes, but we've kept the core the same.

Does the racing take place by day only or are you introducing night races?

The problem with having night races is that the players have to be able to see where they're going. The obvious way to do this is for the vehicles to have great big lights on them, but these could get ripped off or just covered in mud. So we're keeping the majority of the racing to daylight, although we might slip in a night race or two for an extra challenge, like we did in the first game.

Are you still going with the slo-mo crash sequences? It's never been so fun to crash...

Yeah, it was kinda cool, wasn't it? Some people like to get straight back into the race, though. So we have a new system for this that still shows you exactly how you've killed your ride, but doesn't penalize you just for watching it in all its glory.

The music in MotorStorm was a mixed bag (thank you for Monster Magnet and Wolfmother, BTW), as is any licensed soundtrack. Are you going with a compilation again?

The music is another big part of MotorStorm, and one that we've been able to expand on for this game. We'll have another killer soundtrack available, but we can't get into too many details just yet on the overall scope of music. Definitely keep a lookout for some changes on this front. **MotorStorm still appears to be well ahead of its time. Tech-wise, where do you go from here? Can it get better?**

You're right, if you look at the first game

"...we don't want to have any single aspect repeated in every track, apart from spectacle and fun."



again now, it still looks better than most of the other games out there. That won't last forever though, as I think we just got a handle on how to work with the PS3 a bit quicker than most. But beyond the Hollywood-style crashes, the pure sense of speed, and overall look of the game, we feel it can definitely get better, as you'll see soon enough. In our mind though, it's not just the tech that makes the game stand out (although that is a huge part). If it wasn't providing fun and a challenge, then people wouldn't consider it worth having. We know that *MotorStorm: Pacific Rift* has to stand out from the crowd just as much as *MotorStorm* did.

Can you go any further with terrain deformation?

Yep, but before we did, we'd have to ask ourselves why we'd want to. If it served the game better, that's great. But there's no point doing it just for the sake of it. We always look to make our features really important to the game. And again, we're not just dealing with an arid desert environment. There are going to be many other interactive items within the environment (as described earlier) that will make racing in *MotorStorm: Pacific Rift* a challenge for anyone.

How is it that *MotorStorm* still appears utterly superior? What is it about your

development environment that produces such stunning results? We know about the cells, but nobody has been able to produce the results you have. Is it about keeping them all busy? What's the secret?

Being a launch title, *MotorStorm* was up and working on PS3 hardware before almost any other game, so we've already had to spend our time getting to know how to work with the console, and now we're able to put what we learned into our second game. I think there aren't many developers around who can say that right now. But you can't really take the credit away from our dev team, they're really smart and know how to go about making games look stunning. Our technicians, in particular, include some of the industry's most experienced veterans, and they are fantastic mentors to the younger staff.

As a studio, have you considered applying your tech to a character action game after this, or are you strictly in the racing business these days?

We've thought about a lot of things. But we can't say what at the moment. J

The load times for the vehicle select screen were awfully long in the first game. Did you guys have to make some

Welcome to racing fantasy island. Tattoo, fetch my helmet.



concessions there, are you better at getting around loading times in the sequel?

This was another aspect of the first game that we really wanted to get our teeth into. It's just as annoying for us to wait for a car to load as it is for anyone else. So we've made this a priority for the new game. We don't want to keep people waiting again!

I liked the aggressive nature of the AI in the first game, but some people complained it was unreasonably unbalanced. How are you directing the AI this time out?

I think we can have aggressive AI and still have it easier to race against. Yes, it's a balance and one that will never be right for everyone who's going to play it. MotorStorm has so far sold almost four million copies, so you can't expect the difficulty curve to be spot-on for all those players! But I think we can do a better job of giving players the chance to advance and still get the same thrills.

I can imagine some really cool things done with weather conditions affecting the course of the race. You're on an island this time: Will rain come into play?

Differing weather conditions was something that we looked at for a while. We felt that the island presented enough variety already though. There are elements along this line that we are including, however. For example, players will be able

"It's just as annoying for us to wait for a car to load as it is for anyone else. So we've made this a priority for the new game."



to drive through water to cool their engine, and the hazard of the tropical environment will rear its head to affect each race. Each track will have a variety of dynamic and unique elements that create challenges for every race.

If you had to look back at the first game, where do you feel you made some wrong turns? And what areas were you most satisfied with?

There are always aspects of released games that every developer wants to change. After you've been working on something for that long, all you tend to see are the little (or big) things that bug you. We had to make some sacrifices with the first game; features that we wanted to include but didn't have the time or resources. We had to be there on launch day, so some

things had to go. Split screen was probably the biggest of these, and we got plenty of correspondence telling us just how much people wanted it. We tried so hard to make it available for the first game via a download, but it proved impossible. So split screen multiplayer (up to four players) will be something new for MotorStorm: Pacific Rift on day one.

What were we most satisfied with? That would probably vary from one person to the next, but for me it was probably the way that the races were never dull. If it wasn't a rider getting rammed off his bike in front of you, it was a big rig somersaulting and exploding over your head. Great stuff.

You guys kept the physics model fairly loose and fantasy-based. I'd imagine

you won't mess with the overall feel of that foundation too much, but have you considered adding more jumps and treacherous hazards into the mix? Obviously you could go extremely arcadey or pull back a bit more and focus on straight racing.

Our physics model is actually heavily based on reality. It's just that we tone it down a lot for the game to make it more accessible. After all, the game is about you in the middle of a brutal race rather than finding the perfect turning-in point. We work hard to keep the whole game concentrating on the same focus and the action centered on the player, which is why it all feels complete. We think everyone will agree when they have a chance to play it.





Guitar Hero: AEROSMITH

We could be heroes. Again.

words Greg Orlando



this is some sweet emotion. Activision's tapped Aerosmith, one of America's most beloved homegrown bands, to provide their likenesses, signature moves, and bulk of the music for (duh!) Guitar Hero: Aerosmith.

For those perhaps born and raised under a rock, Aerosmith has been rocking out since the 1970s. During its turbulent 30 years in the limelight, the band has produced such wonderful albums as 1975's *Toys in the Attic* as well as the 1980s classics *Pump* and *Permanent Vacation*. Their classic hits *Sweet Emotion*, *Walk This Way*, and *Dream On* are largely considered part of rock's canon.

Players get to take the role of Aerosmith's lead- and rhythm guitarists Joe Perry and Brad Whitford as well as its bassist Tom Hamilton. Classic *Guitar Hero* characters and their bandmates serve as warmup acts and Activision has scattered a host of non-Aerosmith tunes throughout the game's soundtrack.

The game, which remains almost wholly unchanged from *Guitar Hero 3*, takes players from Aerosmith's infant years, playing a gig at Nipmuc Regional High School in Mendon, Mass., to its world tour days—including a spectacular concert at the 2001 Super Bowl. Not included, however, is the tumultuous time between 1979 when the band broke up and its members alternately shuffled between rocking out in solo projects and drug addictions.

Would-be rock stars can cut their teeth on Mott the Hoople's "All the Young Dudes," Joan Jett and the Blackhearts' "I Hate Myself for Loving You," and Cheap Trick's paranoid anthem "Dream Police," among others. Then, for the main course, Aerosmith has supplied songs such as "Sweet Emotion," "Movin' Out," and "Uncle Salty." Interviews with the band, including its iconic frontman, will be liberally interspersed between the game's rhythm-based challenges. And for those about to rock, well, no more need be said.



Guitar Hero: Aerosmith

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, Wii
Developer	NeverSoft/Vicarious Visions
Publisher	Activision
Available	June

"Activision's tapped Aerosmith, one of America's most beloved homegrown bands..."



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Guilty Gear Overture

Not your typical guilt trip

words Nick Des Barres

first things first: Guilty Gear 2 is not the Guilty Gear you know. In many ways, the series took up the torch carried for years by Capcom, gracing us with a full decade of precision 2-D beatdowns. But time waits for no man, and nobody seems to know this as well as series creator Daisuke Ishiwatari. While the developers that inspired him back in 1998 (Capcom, SNK) are now revisiting the genre that made them great, he has chosen to strike off in another direction entirely. Guilty Gear 2 is still all about versus fighting—Ishiwatari describes it as his “ultimate competition tool”—but the game completely shatters convention, and may indeed spur you to reconsider the very essence of versus fighting.

Guilty Gear 2 throws out almost everything that defined the series—the 2-D plane, one-on-one battles, and nearly the entire character roster. Fighting game sequels that have played similar (but not nearly as drastic) tricks, like Street Fighter III and Garou: Fatal Fury, have historically been met with equal parts dismay and respect. Guilty Gear 2 has been no different since its release late last year in Japan—there’s

“Guilty Gear 2 completely shatters convention, and may indeed spur you to reconsider the very essence of versus fighting.”

little point in abandoning years of beloved legacy unless you have a profound statement to make, and thankfully, that's exactly what the game is.

Guilty Gear 2 is obviously 3-D. This is only the first hurdle presented to the series aficionado, though not the largest. GG2 is also four-player and built around net play; it owes quite a bit to FPS death matches and is more RTS than fighting game. Scared yet? Don't be. The experience is fantastic, and has been made continually so with balance patches and gameplay tweaks released as analysis of the mechanics continue. By the time North Americans receive Guilty Gear 2 in the third quarter, one can expect gameplay honed to a diamond sheen, with the equivalent updates provided to Japanese players, facilitating cross-continental matches over Xbox Live.

All this setup, with nary a description of the gameplay nitty-gritty. In short, Guilty Gear 2 is Virtual On meets Command & Conquer meets Devil May Cry. You control a "Master" via a behind-the-character view, who in turn manipulates "Servants," computer-controlled units that must be purchased and deployed through sub-menus. The purpose of the Servants is to capture enemy territory across gigantic, multi-tiered stages, ultimately taking over your opponent's base. This is the only way to win: Defeating another Master in close-quarters combat (the only part of the game that feels like an earlier Guilty Gear) merely results in a penalty and a respawn. The system is such a fresh combination of disparate elements that no nutshelling of its components will ever do it justice, and if the concept intrigues you, I'd strongly suggest checking out the demo on Live.

I've personally been playing Guilty Gear 2 for several months now, and I must admit it is an acquired taste...albeit a delectable one. Given the strong RTS elements at work, Guilty Gear 2 requires a completely different set of skills than a purely adrenaline-fueled 2-D fighting game. This is something that may turn many series' followers off, though I would hope it ultimately creates new fans among the set that believe fighters have become far too complicated and fetishistic for

their own good. We're very enthusiastic about Guilty Gear 2 here at Play, and equally pleased Aksys is bringing the title to the States. Look forward to an in-depth interview with director Daisuke Ishiwatari next month, and continuing coverage up to its fall release.

In Guilty Gear 2, knocking your opponent out is only a means to the ultimate end: capturing their base to win the round.



Guilty Gear 2: Overture

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Arc System Works
Publisher	Aksys
Available	Summer 2008

preview



INFINITE Undiscovery

I bet that octopus thing tastes like grape Jolly Ranchers

words Casey Loe

“tri-Ace seem to be taking great pains to ensure that Infinite Undiscovery ends up as a more cerebral experience than your typical action-RPG button-mash-a-thon.”



After a year of gazing at a single target image, followed by a year of trying to decipher a brief CG teaser, new information on tri-Ace's Infinite Undiscovery is suddenly flowing out of Square-Enix on an almost weekly basis. Current Japanese magazine ads claim that a release date announcement is imminent, and with tri-Ace promising a quick localization, it's looking likely that Xbox 360 RPG fans will be getting their hands on Infinite Undiscovery by the end of the year.

While many tantalizing details have been revealed, tri-Ace is keeping mum on the big question of online play. Players will directly control only a single hero of their four-man party, but it isn't yet clear if they'll have to entrust the others to computer AI or if you'll be able to assign them to other players through online or offline co-op. But the game's FFXII-style seamless battles and the inability to pause (you can be attacked even while scrolling through your inventory) certainly suggest that some form of online multiplayer will be supported.

tri-Ace seem to be taking great pains to ensure that Infinite Undiscovery ends up as a more cerebral experience than your typical action-RPG button-mash-a-thon. For example, an early sequence has the hero unable to fight while he's carrying a wounded comrade in his arms, and must trick his enemies into fighting each other in order to clear a path back to town. Another gimmick is a heavy emphasis on the five senses. When you're battling at night or in dimly lit caves, your ranged fighters won't be able to lock onto distant foes, and even your auto-map will shrink to reveal only the terrain immediately around you. Your enemies will face the same penalties, so you can use the cloak of darkness to sneak around and hit them from behind for significant bonuses. But if you're facing nocturnal creatures with senses that are attuned to darkness, you'll be pretty much screwed unless you can use items, spells and environment features (such as wall sconces in dungeon areas) to light up

the battlefield. Enemies don't merely see realistically: They can also hear, smell, and according to the developers, even taste. Players will attract the attention of distant foes if they make a lot of noise, and scent-oriented foes can be thrown off the trail when baited with food thrown in another direction. We have yet to see an example of taste being a factor, but who knows? Maybe man-eating bosses will spit you out if you have your character roll around in monster poop.

The story revolves around the single moon of Infinite Undiscovery's world, which is the source of the characters' magical powers and an energy source for the planet. But when a sinister organization chained the moon to the world to better exploit its magical resources, bad things started to happen, and hero Capel and his large team of allies will need to put a stop to it. While the game is being created by much of Star Ocean 3's principal staff, tri-Ace has turned to Ryo Mizuno—the writer of the classic Record of Lodoss War series—to handle the story-telling. RPG fans certainly couldn't ask for a more impressive pedigree.



Infinite Undiscovery

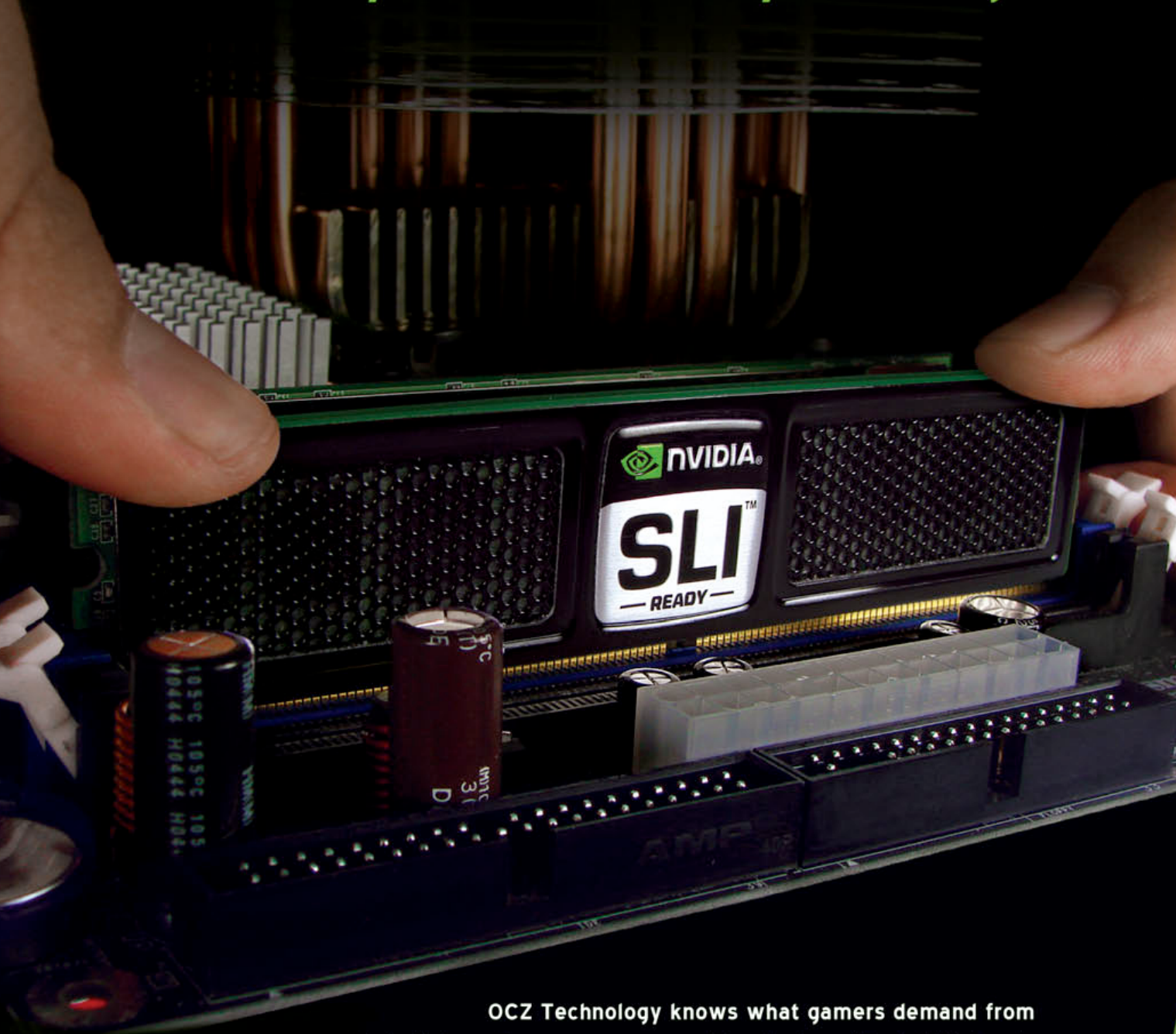
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	tri-Ace
Publisher	Square Enix
Available	TBA

preview

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words Casey Loe



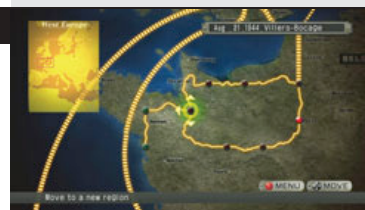
“The flaws of Operation Darkness are obvious, while its charms are less immediately apparent.”

Welcome to the grid. Now go kill something.

If you aren't impressed by British SAS werewolves using black magic to battle vampire Hitler and zombie Nazis, then I just don't know what it's going to take to get through to you. Operation Darkness is the first next-gen game by Japanese SRPG-mill Success Corporation, and while it sold poorly in its native land, its twisted alternate-history setting and clever game mechanics earned it plenty of respect from genre fans.

Unfortunately for Success, the flaws of Operation Darkness are obvious, while its charms are less immediately apparent. The graphics are unimpressive, with spooky Barbie-doll character models and environments that seem to be ported straight from the PS2. The camera is a total train wreck—it's extremely twitchy when fixed in place, yet painfully slow when scrolling around the vast battlefields. Neither the 3-D character-centered view nor the limited overhead view are much use when you're trying to figure out where to position your characters, so you'll most likely end up having to count the pixels between the blue dots and the red dots on the battlefield map. If you screw up your positioning—and I assure you that you will, and often—you're out of luck, because Operation Darkness has no undo command.

But those who have stuck by Operation Darkness found plenty of reasons to endure its flaws. The focus on guns gives



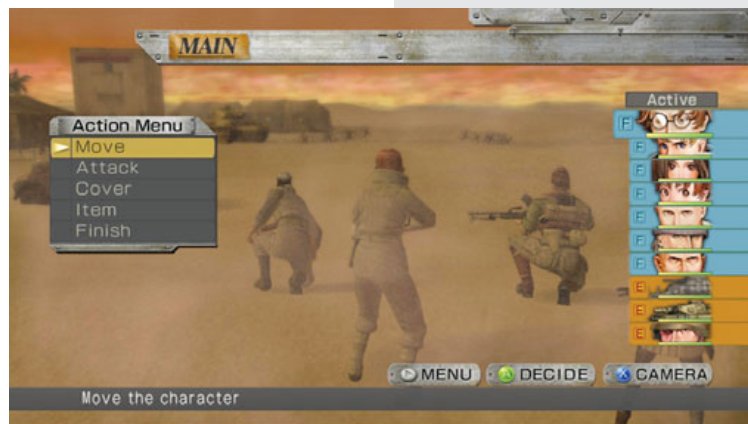
Operation Darkness a very different flavor from typical swordsman-and-cavalry SRPGs, as do some interesting cover mechanics that allow you to set ambushes and have your characters automatically react to enemy actions. The between-battle character customization options are interesting and deep, and the game's campaign is lengthy (in the neighborhood of 70 hours to clear it all) and very nonlinear, with two or three battles opening up for each one you clear.

It will be interesting to see what Atlus does with Operation Darkness in North America. Fixing the camera issues would go a long way toward expanding the game's appeal, but even if that isn't in the cards, there's enough meat here to please strategy enthusiasts and vampire-Nazi-dominatrix fetishists alike.

Operation Darkness

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Success
Publisher	Atlus
Available	June 24

preview



Battle Fantasia

When are polygons not polygons?



words Nick Des Barres

a very unfortunate coincidence surrounds the upcoming Battle Fantasia, a beautiful and superbly crafted one-on-one fighting game developed by Arc System Works. That coincidence is Street Fighter IV—the elephant in the room, better mentioned sooner rather than later. Battle Fantasia beat SFIV to the punch by a full year in Japanese arcades, working with an aesthetically similar dictum: To reproduce with 3-D polygons as accurately as possible the look and feel of hand-drawn sprites. In many ways, I think Battle Fantasia does it better than SFIV, and few would argue its vibrant, all-new J-RPG-esque setting is any less interesting than reproductions of characters we were tired of a decade ago.

Although it is very apparent in still shots that Battle Fantasia is built from polygons, in motion the game can often appear indistinguishable from 2-D animation. Indeed, it feels like a spiritual successor to Capcom's cult fantasy fighter WarZard, a game that was built with hand-drawn animation over pre-rendered polygonal frames. Battle Fantasia takes advantage of modern technology to make that last step unnecessary, and the ingenious way it intentionally “breaks” the laws of 3-D space to simulate the way completely flat 2-D sprites collide with each other is nothing short of revelatory. Arc System Works has been making 2-D fighting games for a decade, and it's clear they know exactly what they're doing.

That craftsmanship and experience carries over into the gameplay, as well. Let archaic fears of past “2.5-D” fighting

travesties like Street Fighter EX and Fatal Fury: Wild Ambition fall by the wayside—Battle Fantasia has all the tight crunchiness a top-flight 2-D Japanese fighting game should, with none of the floatiness and imprecision that plagued earlier attempts at the genre.

A perfectly-respectable twelve characters are available from the start, all sporting the flamboyant character design that has come to be an Arc System Works hallmark. Sure, there's the relatively bland J-RPG hero Urs, but there's also Watson, a sentient bunny in a wizard's cap, and Coyori, a Chinoise neko-musume (“cat girl”). The central original game system introduced in Battle Fantasia is the “Gachi Button”, which essentially maps Street Fighter III's beginner-unfriendly Parry system onto a single, easy-to-understand button. In practice, this replicates SFIII's Parrying exactly—a successful Gachi defense removes block stun and tick damage. For the more advanced player, an expertly-timed stick tap plus the Gachi Button will unleash a Gachi Drive, which smashes your opponent out of their

“There are a heck of a lot of fighting games coming in late 2008, but few with the burnished, handcrafted aura Battle Fantasia exudes.”



attack and sets them up for a massive aerial combo.

The main draw for this home port of Battle Fantasia is an extensive RPG-style Story Mode for each playable character, with a reported total of ten hours of voice. We have not yet played this mode and are looking forward to it very much, which should hopefully speak volumes towards the wonderful quality of the core game. There are a heck of a lot of fighting games coming in late 2008, but few with the burnished, handcrafted aura Battle

Fantasia exudes. If you're a fan of the genre, you should start getting excited now.

Battle Fantasia

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Arc System Works
Publisher	TBD
Available	TBD 2008

preview

Naruto

Ultimate Ninja Storm

Triple-teaming the competition in more ways than one

words Casey Loe

t hird-party PS3 exclusives have become a rarity, but the unusual way in which the Naruto license has been divvied up by platform has given Namco Bandai and the developers at CyberConnect2 no choice but to build their game around Sony's high-spec machine. The results have proven spectacular: *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm* doesn't just capture the look of the anime on which it's based, but exceeds its source material with visual effects, motion blur, and a blistering frame rate that no traditional animation studio could ever match. Among its most impressive feats are six-character brawls and massive bosses like the One-Tailed Shukaku, a screen-filling fox creature that Naruto battles in real time with a mix of standard

fighting tactics and *God of War 2*-esque button-pressing sequences. We sat down with CyberConnect2 president Hiroshi Matsuyama to get the details on his company's stunning new project.

Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm

System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	CyberConnect2
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Available	October

preview



"Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm doesn't just capture the look of the anime on which it's based, but exceeds its source material..."

Naruto gives Kakashi a lesson of his own.

INTERVIEW

CyberConnect2 president Hiroshi Matsuyama

I was surprised to hear that Ultimate Ninja Storm would be coming out in the U.S. first.

Hiroshi Matsuyama: Well, basically when we were making this game, we looked at the demographic of who was actually enjoying the PlayStation 3 the most, and that turned out to be North American users. A lot of the Naruto fans in Japan are younger than they are in the U.S., and they don't own PS3s.

Did you approach development differently knowing that it would launch first in the U.S.?

We did. The Japanese users tend to prefer a focus on story line, while U.S. users prefer more of a focus on action. So we tried to make sure that the story line sequences didn't go on too long.

We've heard that you were considering taking the series in a more open-ended direction. Would you consider this an "open-world" game?

What we're showing right now is the battle mode, but there's also a mode called the Ultimate Mission Mode. In that mode, your playground is Konoha (Leaf Village), which is a very huge area. There you can wander freely and interact with all sorts of characters to receive training and accept missions and things like that. Of course, we didn't limit ourselves to just that—there are plenty of other mountain, forest, and river areas where you can experience other missions.

Are you free to pursue the missions in any order, or is there a linear structure to the game?

It's about half and half. There are key missions that you have to play to advance



the story, but as you play you often have the option to choose different sorts of missions. For example, you may have a choice of three missions, but you only need to complete one to proceed. So the player is given a choice of which missions they actually want to play, and as they proceed they rise in the hierarchy, until they're able to challenge the game's highest-ranked missions. And as you clear each mission you also receive points, which you can use to unlock other features within the game.

How many other characters will there be besides Naruto, and to what extent can you play them in Ultimate Mission Mode?

In the battle mode, there are going to be over 25 playable characters. In the Ultimate Mission Mode, there are 100 different missions, each with its own story. You play Naruto for some of them, but others may take place

from another character's point of view, or give the player the option to choose from multiple characters.

How would you compare your game to Ubisoft's Naruto: Rise of a Ninja on the Xbox 360?

I think that's actually a very good game. But I am quite confident that the game we're developing will

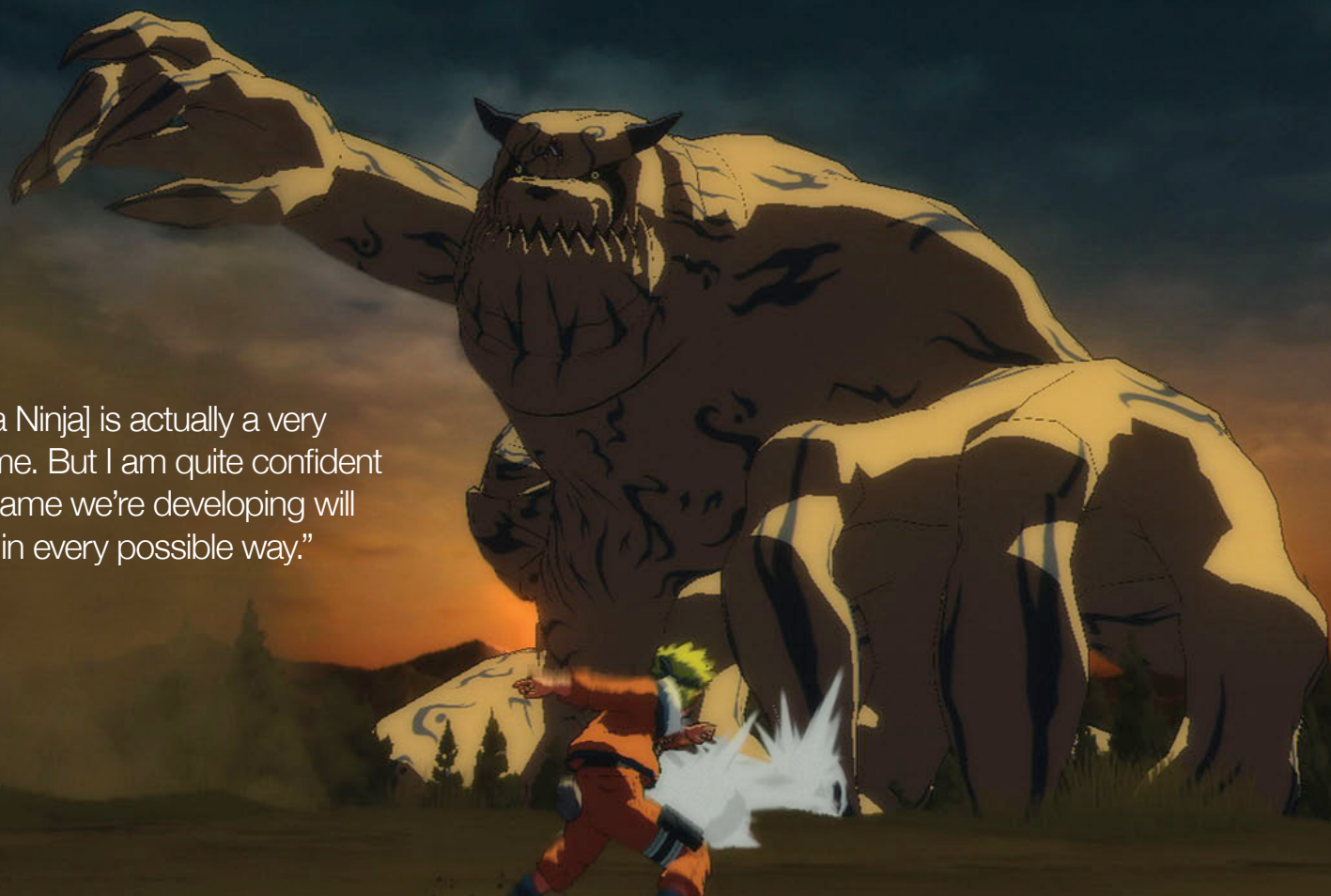
exceed it in every possible way.

Can you give us some specific examples?

When Rise of a Ninja came out, it was the first next-gen Naruto game on the market, and I'm sure all the Naruto fans were wowed by the environment and character model quality. But as you can see from what we have done here, I think you'll agree that they'll be even more impressed



"[Rise of a Ninja] is actually a very good game. But I am quite confident that the game we're developing will exceed it in every possible way."



by what we've been able to accomplish.

Absolutely.

And one of the key points on top of that is that our game actually follows the anime from the first episode to the 135th. *[Ed. note: Rise of a Ninja spanned the first 80 episodes.]* Every single character that appeared in that span will appear in this game, so I think you can say that this is the complete version of the Naruto story.

One of the game's new features is the ability to fight in three-man teams. How does that work?

You'll notice on the top screen there's an L1 and an R1 button slot, and you can assign characters to those slots. When you press the button corresponding to the allocated character, they'll actually enter the battle and use whatever jutsu or special moves they have. For example, you can bring them into the middle of a combo to lengthen the combo, or while you're trying to recover chakra, you can summon them to preoccupy your opponent. Skillful usage of your team members is the key to victory, but you'll notice that once a character is grayed-out, you won't be able to use that character until their meter recovers. So you'll need to carefully determine when you want to use them.

And you can make a team out of any of the 25 characters?

That is possible. One of the key factors is that not only does this follow the actual anime, but as you unlock characters you can start changing the members inside your team. For example, you could implement Orochimaru as a support character, even though you would never imagine him being a teammate for Naruto.

Since the game can handle six characters on screen at once, is it possible to have a three-on-three team brawl?

Unfortunately we don't have that type of multiplayer, where you can allocate each character to one player.

What sort of online modes will you be implementing in this title?

We unfortunately won't be able to implement the ability to battle with other players online in this game. But in place of that, we are preparing downloadable content that will increase the overall volume of the game.

Will that be free?

I can't really answer that question yet.

When will we get a chance to play the game?

Hopefully we will be able to make a demo available to players this summer!

The lighting must be seen to be believed.

Tales of Vesperia

Better cancel that import-store pre-order while you can...



words Casey Loe



When we debuted Namco-Bandai's *Tales of Vesperia* in our March issue, we were left with the impression that we'd be lucky to see a December release, but that we could at least busy ourselves with the Wii's *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* in the meantime. Our assumptions proved to be wrong on both counts. "*Tales of Vesperia* will actually be coming out in North America *before* *Symphonia*," promises Tsutomu Gouda, producer of both titles. "And it will be coming out sooner than you think."

Namco-Bandai has been focusing so heavily on the North American version that they expect to have it in stores within a single week of its Japanese release. And since Japanese retailers are listing dates in late summer and early autumn, it seems possible that *Tales of Vesperia* will be hitting American shelves well in advance of the holiday season. (Gouda is still promising a 2008 release for the North American version of *Dawn of the New World*, but that's likely to be much later in the year.)

Reinforcing their commitment to the U.S. market, *Vesperia* received its playable debut at Namco-Bandai's recent Editor's Day in San Francisco, and to our surprise, it was already translated and voiced in English. While we could only play a brief segment of the game, many of its promised features were on full display. The hand-textured characters look fantastic in motion, the game zips smoothly from field to battle without lengthy loading times, and a new system that allows multiple on-field enemies to attack simultaneously showed plenty of potential for adding tension and challenge to standard enemy encounters.

Tales of Vesperia clearly cost a ton of money to make, and Namco-Bandai is taking a big risk by launching the title on the Xbox 360, which is a niche platform in *Tales'* stronghold territory of Japan. Success in America will be essential, and Gouda is confident that he's found the winning formula. "In the past, it's always taken at least six months to localize *Tales* games for North America, but we've managed to cut that down significantly."

"*Tales of Vesperia* will actually be coming out in North America *before* *Symphonia*. And it will be coming out sooner than you think."

He's also done something that the team has long wanted to do—hire a singer to create an international theme song. (All previous *Tales* games have simply had their Japanese-language theme songs removed for the North American versions.) Gouda finally found the right partner in Bonnie Pink, a longtime Japanese singer/songwriter who has been writing songs in fluent English for her entire career. She was given an early look at the game over a year ago, and wrote a song based on the relationship between hero Yuri and his

childhood friend Flynn, who end up on opposite sides of a political rift. Anyone interested in the finished song, a rollicking, up-tempo number titled "Ring a Bell," can download the track from iTunes right now. "It's sort of my worldwide debut," noted Bonnie Pink, who appeared at the event to debut the song. (You can also find many of Bonnie Pink's albums on iTunes—I recommend 2004's *Even So*.)

Of course, Gouda knows it will take more than a quick localization and a catchy theme song to succeed in North America, where his team's most recent releases have fallen far short of *Tales of Symphonia*'s success. He has one more marketing point that he isn't too humble to cite: "*Vesperia* has the highest quality of any *Tales* game released so far. The gameplay, the graphics, everything—it's a top quality game." We won't have to wait long to put that claim to the test.

Tale of my sword
slicing where the
sun doth shine.



Bonnie Pink. Think maybe that's a stage name?



Tales of Vesperia

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Namco Tales Studio
Publisher	Namco-Bandai
Available	2008

preview

www.playmagine.com

nu-THQ

Looking out for number one: You.

words Dave Halverson

tHQ has released some great games over the past few years but their current lineup holds the promise of both strong sequels and new concepts that could turn into new franchises of their own, joining their first-rate Pixar lineup (via Heavy Iron) and WWE foothold.... Global domination can't be far behind.

I don't see a 360/PS3 version of Tak or Spongebob, but I'm gonna let that slide. On the heels of the esteemed Moto GP '08 and MX vs. ATV Untamed, their next feat for racing fans, Baja (2XL, 360/PS3), takes place over 100 square miles of open terrain, with comprehensive customization of every possible vehicle type, along with hill-climbs, rallies and other events leading up to actual participation in the Baja enduro! Can I get a pee-bag over here!?

In Darksiders: Wrath of War (Vigil Games, 360/PS3), the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have been betrayed by their master, stripped of their powers and cast down to Earth where all restaurants are Taco Bell. Well, not quite. Wrath of War focuses on the first of the Horseman, WAR and his phantom stallion RUIN, as they set out for revenge in a post-apocalyptic demon-filled world. If ever screenshots were worth a thousand words, these are a thousand and four: "I just wet myself." The incomparable Joe Mad (Madureira) is behind the pen on this one and we're hot on his trail.

Set 50 years after the events of Red

Faction, Red Faction: Guerilla (Volition, PC/PS3/360) also happens to be set five years since the last installment so expect destruction-based gameplay within huge open worlds and true physics-based devastation to rumble your Pak in the near future.

Crypto's been keeping busy too, shedding his Wii skin from Big Willy Unleashed for the big HD sequel Destroy All Humans: Path of the Furon (PS3/360), where he'll throw down all-new kung fu skills under the tutelage of an Alien Master. Wax on!

Before you check into GTA IV rehab, Saints Row 2 (Volition, PS3/360) offers full co-op campaign play, customizable vehicles and cribs (yo) along with character creation that allows you to be male, female "or something in between." She-males in Stilwater? They better include x-ray vision so I don't be talkin' up some dude yo. Or maybe you're tired of human protagonists. Inspired by the battle between computer-generated scorpions in the opening credits of 3000 Miles to Graceland (not really), Deadly Creatures (Rainbow Studios, Wii) is an action-thriller set in a world of arachnids, scorpions, reptiles and various killer bugs where the player plays both the hunter and the hunted, and the coolest pliable hero since Gumby, de Blob (Blue Tongue, Wii), takes on the war against color, waged by the evil I.N.K.T. Corp., battling their inky minions to return the color to Chroma City. It's kinda like those butt trails dogs make, only in color.

"If ever screenshots were worth a thousand words, these are a thousand and four..."



Baja

Darksiders



Saints Row 2



Red Faction: Guerilla



Destroy All Humans: Path of Furon



Deadly Creatures



da Blob



It's not unusual...

How to build a better bear, bird, and piñata... in seclusion

words Greg Orlando



Okay, sure it's *somewhere*. But good luck finding it. Even if you managed to stumble across the eminently-British Cock Inn somewhere in Twycross, the folks at Rare would still laugh and proclaim you were cold as ice, and nowhere near the vicinity of their office.

No, to get to Rare, you have to follow the rolling hills, motor past the gently sloping verdant pastures with sheep and horses, travel past the seemingly endless farms until the road is flanked by trees. Follow this road, and when the trees all but close up on your vehicle, congratulations are in order: You're at the gates of nowhere.

This, sadly, is as far as you'll get. The gates are real. They're solid steel, too, and there for a reason. This is Microsoft protecting its \$357 million investment. This is no one getting into Rare headquarters without an excess of permission.

Past the gate, the road winds past a duck pond and a series of greenhouses. Somewhere nearby, there's a menagerie that served as the inspiration for Rare's most recent Xbox 360 title *Viva Piñata*. Travel past a series of good-sized parking lots and there it is: a rather nondescript brick building.

Inside, statues of Rare's honey bear Banjo and secret agent Joanna Dark greet entrants. The corridor walls are lined with art celebrating Rare's 20 years of game making. Among the most delicious pieces are a series of black-and-white line drawings heralding the mature-themed *Conker's Bad Fur Day* for the Nintendo 64; one features the protagonist rodent passed out, his face in an overflowing toilet. "Shhh! Conker is taking a nap!" the ad proclaims. A second ad has Conker standing underneath a tree, his face sandwiched between a woman's rather large mammarys. "Conker is a squirrel," the accompanying text reads. "Squirrels hunt for acorns. Can you help Conker find some acorns?"

Today, Rare and Microsoft have thrown open the gates. The normally secretive developer is playing host to approximately 50 Web and print writers in a two-day event spotlighting the return of some old friends. With the veil of secrecy at least temporarily lifted, Microsoft and Rare will take their guests on a tour of these storied offices, including walk-throughs of the large rectangular buildings, affectionately dubbed "barns," that serve as the houses for Rare's individual development teams.

On this day, it's all about the reunion of bird and bear and the triumphant return of party favors.

Today, it's all about Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts and *Viva Piñata*: Trouble in Paradise.

"This is Microsoft protecting its \$357 million investment. This is no one getting into Rare headquarters without an excess of permission."

Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts and Bolts

Bear necessities

The cutesy bird-and-bear combination of Banjo and Kazooie made their debut on the Nintendo 64 in 1998 in an 3-D, third-person-perspective action platformer that was as long on laughs as it was concerned with collecting doodads. In it, the honey bear Banjo toted around Kazooie in his backpack, and the two were off on a grand quest to rescue Banjo's sister and, ultimately, defeat the witch Gruntilda. A sequel titled Banjo-Tooie followed in 2000.

Eight years later, the book of Banjo is being written by Rare. Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts is a true sequel to Banjo-Tooie, but not in the way anyone might expect.

The new game is not so reliant on collection. This should come as a surprise to no one; Tooie was probably over-reliant on its emphasis of accumulating baubles. What is surprising is the game's focus: Banjo and Kazooie won't primarily be concerned with platform-hopping; platforming in Nuts & Bolts is largely relegated to the game's central hub, Showdown Town.

Rare has shifted gears. Banjo's skull-faced shaman pal Mumbo hasn't quite turned in his spell book, but he has become more of a gearhead. He now owns a magical mechanic shop where Banjo can build, well, just about anything. Using a series of body parts, seats, wheels, propulsion systems, propellers, fuel pods, wings, gadgets, and weapons, players can cobble together traditional cars, jet planes, boats, or helicopters. The game's workshops allow players to manipulate a 3-D view in order to stack individual pieces together. Some basic rules must be followed (parts cost money, wheels have to be touching some part of a vehicle's body), but beyond that, players are free to experiment to their hearts' desire. Once a vehicle is created, it can be painted or overlaid with decals, saved, and taken out into the game world.

With approximately 1,600 base components, Nuts & Bolts offers the player options to create a dream vehicle—for every situation. “We already have the entire *Star Wars* catalog [of vehicles] in there,” the game's senior designer Shaun Read says.

Just aping *Star Wars* vehicles won't cut it in Nuts & Bolts. Players will need to tailor their vehicles to the game's challenges. In one stunt-themed area, players have

to make spectacular leaps off a ramp. In the game's Nutty Acres, it's necessary to build a vehicle to collect coconuts, be it an airship, a ground-pounder, or a combination of the two. What works well in one world may prove a spectacular disaster in another.

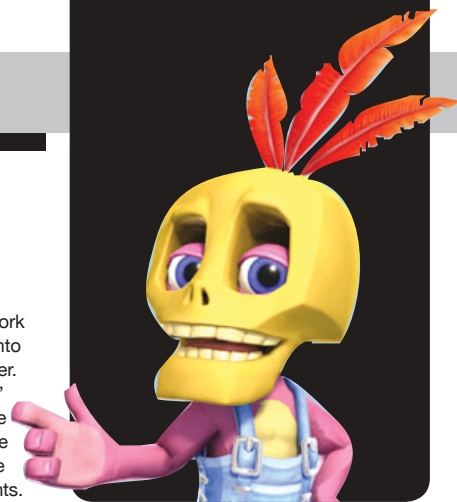
Case in point: The deliciously named Orlandomobile, a behemoth of casual design, proved to be completely unworkable. It was modeled, loosely, after the real-life behemoth of casual car design, the 1979 Chevrolet Malibu. The Orlandomobile, affectionately dubbed by its creator, featured a broad, flat base. A seat was placed in the center (each vehicle requires a seat for the protagonists, and several designs are available), and two large fuel pods were placed on the car's sides. Then a large engine was added, as were four elevated monster wheels.

It was a simple enough design, and probably not a total failure for a first try. It certainly looked cool, but was entirely too powerful and too top-heavy. The vehicle would tip and roll if it even looked as if its wheels might turn. Worse, it would run out of fuel in approximately 14 or so seconds. Because of this, it was more like the real-world Chevrolet Malibu than its creator

could have ever anticipated.

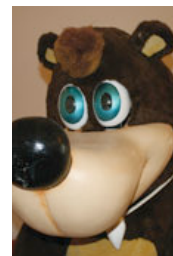
The ability to tinker, create, and rework different craft will also feature heavily into the game's other big feature: multiplayer. Rare showcased a few of Nuts & Bolts' new challenges, including Queen of the Knoll, a king-of-the-hill challenge where players were required to stay within the confines of a moving ring to score points. Initially, everyone was given a standard car equipped with both a freeze ray to temporarily incapacitate opponents and a “boot in the box” device to physically kick an enemy car. In later matches, the gloves came off: Players were free to create their own vehicles. Some opted to stay above the fray in helicopters. Others chose to create tanklike cars laden with weapons. One person created an odd car with a sloping front end that held an ejector cannon; it could get underneath any wheeled vehicle and then flip it up. It was crazy enough to work.

A second mode was fought in the confines of a sumo ring, and the goal was to knock everyone else out. Inside the ring, flying vehicles were easy pickings. There wasn't a tremendous amount of room to maneuver, and any ground-based vehicle



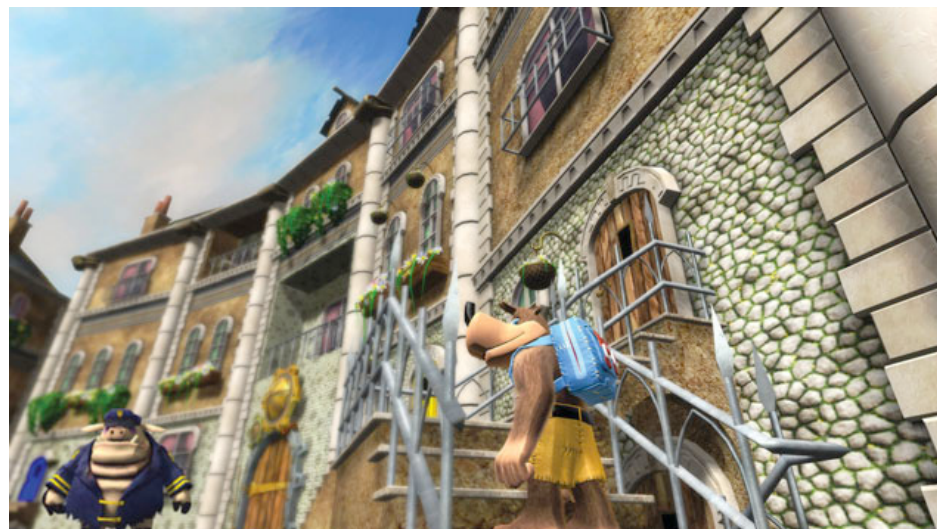
Andy Wilson
Producer, Rare Ltd.

Andy Wilson began his career at Rare in 1997, testing major N64 titles such as Banjo-Kazooie, then enjoyed a brief stint in game design before taking on a more permanent production role in 2000. Rare had yet to begin appointing game-specific producers at this stage, but Andy became one of the first of these when he joined the Conker: Live & Reloaded team in 2004. Following the game's release in 2005, Andy helped out on Kameo, Perfect Dark Zero, and Viva Piñata, saw Jetpac Refuelled through to release, then took up his current producer position on Rare's high-profile Xbox 360 Banjo sequel.



Gregg Mayles
Head of Design, Rare Ltd.

After a misspent childhood playing games, Gregg discovered a secret warp which transported him to an equally misspent adulthood creating them. Gregg's a local lad who's been at Rare since 1989, and after a few years hiding in testing, his overactive imagination and lack of common sense proved ideal qualifications to become a designer. While pretending to have a “real” job, Gregg has worked on hardware as diverse as the NES, coin-op, and Xbox 360; leading the creative direction of games such as Donkey Kong Country, Banjo-Kazooie, Grabbed by the Ghoulies, Viva Piñata, and now Banjo's latest adventure. If anyone can be considered the father of an imaginary bear in unfeasibly tight shorts, then I suppose it must be Gregg. When not daydreaming, his interests include unreliable plastic cars and attempting to play various sports badly.



“Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts is a true sequel to Banjo-Tooie, but not in the way anyone might expect. ...”



Rich Cousins
Producer, Rare Ltd.

Rich Cousins joined Rare in 2000, following four years of work as a Nintendo hotline manager, which ended in a chance meeting with a Rare representative at a trade show. The subsequent time in Rare's testing department gave Rich experience on such games as Banjo-Toxie, Star Fox Adventures, and Grabbed by the Ghoulies and led to an assistant producer role on the Perfect Dark Zero team. By the end of that project, Rich had graduated to producer, and now works alongside Andy Wilson on the upcoming Banjo project. Rich enjoys the cinema, books, games, eating out, walking the dogs with his wife, and supporting Southampton FC.



Shaun Read
Senior Designer,
Rare Ltd.

Shaun Read has been at Rare since 1997; he started as a tester and moved up through the ranks to his current position as a senior designer on the highly anticipated Xbox 360 Banjo project. In a testing capacity, Shaun worked on the original Banjo-Kazooie, as well as Diddy Kong Racing, Conker's Bad Fur Day and various handheld titles; he was then tapped to help out with design work on the likes of Dinosaur Planet (later to become Star Fox Adventures) and Kameo: Elements of Power. Shaun spends his time outside work watching football at Villa Park (with his family), playing games, and drinking beer (not with his family).



"...players will be treated to a spoof of 1980s-style American soap opera introductions with dramatic portraits highlighted by goofy text."

with an upward-shooting ice cannon could easily freeze an airborne target, and then push the grounded craft to its doom.

Burden to bear

Nuts & Bolts picks up eight years after Banjo-Toxie and once again pits the bird-bear duo against their persistent nemesis Gruntilda. Except Gruntilda is now a head inside a jar (perhaps a delightful homage to Matt Groening's *Futurama*) atop a robot body.

Banjo and his pal have suffered, too, and the years have been rather unkind. "Banjo starts this game as a big, fat, out-of-shape platform character," Read says. "He's actually devolved," adds Nuts & Bolts' producer Rich Cousins.

"The move lists have been reduced dramatically," Read says.

What remains constant is the game's sense of whimsy. Each stage will feature a different introductory cut-scene, and Read says the emphasis here will be on parody. For example, before entering Nutty Acres, players will be treated to a spoof of 1980s-style American soap opera introductions with dramatic portraits highlighted by goofy text. Mumbo-Jumbo, then, is introduced as "the nutty doctor."

The temptation here may have been to go overboard on the graphics or make use





Salvatore Filecchia
Lead Programmer,
Rare Ltd.

Salvatore Filecchia is lead programmer on Banjo-Kazooie 3. After graduating from Glasgow University in 1999, he joined Rare as a gameplay engineer on Banjo-Tooie. Since then he has worked in a variety of software engineering roles on Grabbed by the Ghoulies, Viva Piñata, and Banjo 3. Outside of work, Sav enjoys spending time with friends and family and playing golf, soccer, and computer games.

of increased computing power to have, say, Banjo speak English instead of sputtering out gibberish. After all, Nuts & Bolts will be the first Banjo game to appear on the Xbox 360. Yet Rare has seemingly resisted this temptation, keeping both protagonists relatively blocky, angular, and wholly incomprehensible—as they appeared on the Nintendo 64.

Do not misconstrue. Rare has not skimped. The cartoonish, almost awkward look of the heroes is complemented by a series of pretty environments. Nutty Acres seems modeled after the faux world in which Jim Carrey is imprisoned in the reality-TV parody *The Truman Show*. Acres' blue skies serve as the world's border; an impenetrable curtain. A huge series of clockwork gears turns endlessly, powering a wheel that turns and spins giant metal clouds through the air. A huge volcano belches smoke into the skies and brown-and-white wind-up, boxlike cows putter across the greens. And for those inclined to explore beyond the coconut farm, there's a series of tiny islands peaking up through crystal blue seas. It's quite idyllic.

Online content is being prepped, but this is a matter for another day. Neither Read nor Cousins will discuss it, save to say Nuts & Bolts will have an Xbox 360 Live component.



"Nuts & Bolts picks up eight years after Banjo-Tooie and once again pits the bird-bear duo against their persistent nemesis Gruntilda."

Viva Piñata: Trouble in Paradise



Gotta smash 'em all

Viva Piñata was a game without an identity. On one hand, it was a cute and vibrant cartoon tie-in. Brilliantly colored piñata animals lived and played harmoniously in a whimsical garden that a player tended—right up until the point where the creatures would set upon and, at times, eat each other. And Viva Piñata did not stop there. The game also featured sours, malicious piñatas that would either poison or outright kill their tame brethren, and Dastardos, a malicious imp that would emerge from beyond the garden to put sick and dying animals out of their misery. It was enough to give Damien, spawn of the dark lord Satan, night terrors.

Piñata was also a hardcore simulation, a game that required even advanced players to hunt for clues on Web sites such as pinataisland.info and gamefaqs.com. If kids were horrified by the cartoonish killing fields that Piñata offered, the adults who became fans were only the hardest of the hardcore.

Given the chance, Piñata would eat a player's life. And despite its identity crisis, the game was often wonderful—a rare (pardon the pun) experience that allowed for great creativity and a lot of experimentation.

Second chances in this world are relatively few and far between. Viva Piñata: Trouble in Paradise is, then, a Rare title in both senses of the word.



I'll bet one look at a stick would wipe that smile off his face.

Snow falls on
Piñata island.
That's cold, man.



Steven Brand
Producer,
Rare Ltd.

Steven Brand is lead producer on *Viva Piñata: Trouble in Paradise* and is responsible for the day-to-day running of the *Viva Piñata* production team. After studying photography and graphic design, Steven joined Rare in 1997 to work as a product analyst on popular N64 kart-racer *Diddy Kong Racing*. After a stint testing the original *Banjo-Kazooie*, Steven joined the then-named *Dinosaur Planet* team in an assistant design role. As the title progressed and became *Star Fox Adventures*, Steven's on-team responsibilities grew, providing a natural progression into a production role. Steven worked on the original *Viva Piñata* as assistant producer before taking the lead role on *Viva Piñata: Trouble in Paradise*.

"We knew we were aiming a game at the broadest popular audience," Justin Cook, lead designer for *Trouble in Paradise* says about the first *Piñata*. "Being gamers ourselves, we thought we could just add layers of depth that you could ignore almost, if you didn't want to get involved with those."

"This time, to address the issue between the hardcore and the casual gamer, we've actually added a separate mode called 'Just for Fun,'" he says. "It's a really stripped-down version of the game: You get an infinite amount of cash, all the shops are open immediately, and the piñatas have a really reduced set of [visiting and resident] requirements." For kids, this means their beloved piñatas will not fight with one another, nor will they be eaten by other creatures. The game's enemies have been removed in this mode, too.

This seems a simple and effective way to deal with the problem. The game has been split, with something for children and, thankfully, more of the same cute yet dog-eat-dog simulation for the adults. Only with more intensity. "We've turned the screw a little bit and made the baddies more bad," Cook says.

Bring on the trouble...

Piñata Vision, etc., ain't blurry

Piñata Vision should make for an excellent bullet point on the game's promotional materials. This feature allows players to acquire cards that can be scanned during gameplay with the Xbox 360 Live Vision Camera. These cards make it possible for, well, anything to be inserted in the game. Creatures can instantaneously be added to play. A host of new items can be unlocked in the game's shops. Even enemies such as Professor Pester can be summoned into a player's garden.

Players will again be given a solitary garden to tend, but will be able to access two new game areas in the Pinarctic and Dessert Desert. In these two areas, players will be able to lay down and bait special traps to catch piñatas. Once the traps are set, it's possible to jump back to the main garden to check in on things. Trapped animals can then be taken to a player's garden to become residents, although a baited trap might not catch its intended target. To keep any trapped animals happy, a gardener can now fill portions of his allotted space with sand and snow.

Cooperative play has been added. This seems like an oddity in a game where players control a cursor as a godlike character, but it lets parents play the game

"...to address the issue between the hardcore and the casual gamer, we've actually added a separate mode called 'Just for Fun.'"

with their kids. The second player serves as a sort of helper character with the ability to do good deeds, such as digging holes to plant flowers and crops and then watering the various flora. Each good deed performed increases the second player's ability to help out his partner, and a full meter allows for item transformation (pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns, etc.) piñata healing, and "candiosity" upgrades for the various creatures.

Gardens can now be decorated with new items including trains, cameras, spooky coffins, statues, and props. Piñatas will get to interact with many of these items, creeping up to the statue of the Great Gobstobbler to try and catch him before he goes into hiding or launching an explosive rocket in the sky. Some of the props will be purely aesthetic. Others will be able to affect the environment, creating rainstorms and the like.

Rare has taken the time to add new creature animations to flesh out the piñata species' interactions with one another. Creatures, then, won't just kill or maim one another. They'll get to play and explore their environment together, often whimsically.



Justin Cook
Designer, Rare Ltd.

Justin Cook is one of the designers working on Viva Piñata: Trouble in Paradise. Cook started working for Rare in 1999, testing Perfect Dark for the N64. He worked in testing until 2003, testing such titles as Banjo-Tooie, Conker's Bad Fur Day, and Star Fox Adventures (along with many others). In 2003, he worked on It's Mr. Pants in a junior design role. Following the Pants project, he became part of a small prototype team working on what would become Viva Piñata. Justin's day-to-day schedule includes harvesting good ideas from other members of the team and passing them off as his own, but he is also responsible for your having a good time when you play Viva Piñata: Trouble in Paradise.



Adam Park
Assistant
Producer,
Rare Ltd.

Adam Park is the assistant producer on Viva Piñata: Trouble In Paradise, having joined Rare in 2007. Adam has been busy assisting in the daily work of a busy development team since day one—finding time to add vocals for the penguin piñata, of course... Before coming to Rare, Adam worked as a journalist and as part of the online music industry. Outside of work Adam enjoys traveling, listening to music, playing videogames, and numerous other clichés.



Rare promises new piñatas, such as the cute little ladybug-ish Bispotti, new sour creatures to tame (four in all), a series of tricks for each animal to learn, and a brand-new story line featuring the evil Professor Pester. The bastard is, again, up to no good, and Cook describes his antics as "extra fiendish."

This trouble will also come with an online component. Cook chalks up the lack of online functionality in the first Piñata to a simple lack of time. Expect Xbox Live to play host to gardeners aplenty in one fashion or another.

WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009

In the steel chair we trust

words Greg Orlando

It's not been an easy road for THQ when it comes to wrestling. The company has put out nine video games based on the popular World Wrestling Entertainment license and, to put it mildly, some of them have stunk in the manner of an elephant's butt. One need only point to *WrestleMania XIX* for the GameCube—a title so delightfully incomprehensible it routinely pitted players, as hardened pro wrestlers, against security officers and construction workers—as evidence that (as the cute Beatle Ringo Starr once mused) “you know it don’t come easy.”

WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009, the 10th THQ-produced WWE game, promises to arrive during a spike in wrestling's popularity. Recently, even presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Barack Obama attempted to ride the wave, courting grappling fans with specially tailored messages that aired during a recent WWE Raw show. In the midst of the mudslinging and a hotly contested race for the Democratic nomination, wrestling, if only for a few minutes, took precedence for the candidates.

“We are definitely going to knock you on your ass,” Cory Ledesma says. Ledesma, Smackdown vs. Raw 2009's creative director, has something to prove. This is not only a milestone title in the series, but it's also set to release against a competing

product, Midway's *TNA Impact!*, a game based on Total Nonstop Action wrestling. For the record, Ledesma is unimpressed with Midway's effort. “I hear they have 20 people on [the game's] roster,” he says. Later, when it's time to preview his game, he again pokes fun at TNA by presenting one of its DVDs as a coaster.

Smackdown vs. Raw 2009 turns its focus to tag team wrestling. For far too long, this aspect of grappling was largely an afterthought for THQ. Now, however, two-on-two wrestling will be refined with the consolidation of the momentum meters (each team now shares one meter), the addition of tag-team-specific finishing moves, and a new emphasis on drama in terms of team interchanges. During matches, the Hardy brothers Matt and Jeff can waylay foes with synchronized dropkicks. Bad guys Randy Orton and Mr. Kennedy can take turns holding and beating a foe foolish enough to wander into their portion of the ring, or distract the hapless referee by grabbing his shoulder. Hot tags, wherein an injured wrestler makes contact with his rested partner, give a team an offensive boost. A wrestler can also make a “blind” tag by reaching out and touching his unaware partner—a move more often associated with teams that aren't gelling very well.

Players will also be able to customize any wrestler in the game with a very neat “create a finisher” mode. Here, more than

“We are definitely going to knock you on your ass.” —Cory Ledesma

500 different animations can be linked together to invent a devastating hold, throw, or submission move. It will be possible to insert dramatic pauses, taunts, strikes, and grapples into the mix—Ledesma demonstrated a move called the “F-U Brainbuster,” wherein one wrestler picked up an opponent, slung him over his shoulder, and then slammed the poor fellow right on his head. Necessity is the mother of invention and this, well, is a mother of a great new feature.

Online content will flesh out all three console versions (the Wii gets online wrestling and the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 may see roster updates via downloadable content). A brand-new Road to Wrestlemania feature serves as the game's branching-path story mode, taking players on a winding, three-month journey from the Royal Rumble to the biggest show of all. Expect something akin to a pier six brawl inside a house of fire.

WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PS2, PSP, Wii, DS
Developer	Yuke's
Publisher	THQ
Available	Fall 2008



Xbox 360



PlayStation 3

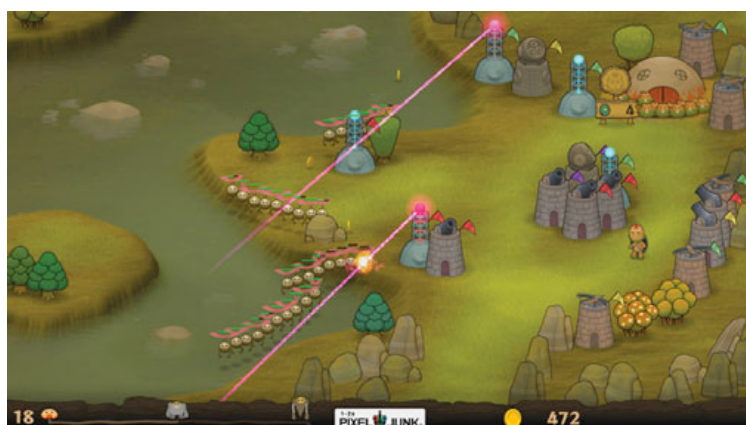
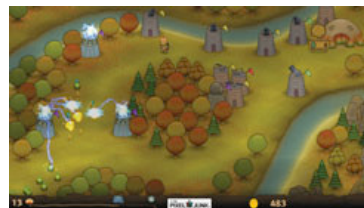
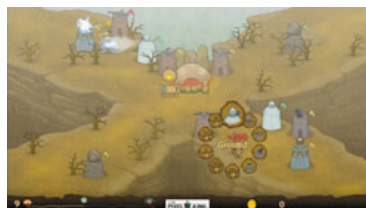


Pixel Junk Monsters Encore

System(s)	PS3 (PSN)	Publisher	Sony
Developer	Q Games	Available	May

my apologies for skirting my responsibilities for this preview; before getting into Pixel Junk Monsters Encore, I spent far too much time with Pixel Junk Monsters for reference, where instead I should have been

spending more time on this expansion pack of sorts, which doesn't alter the gameplay at all, really, offering more music, levels and environmental details, and... perhaps a slightly easier difficulty? A must for rabid PJ Monsters fans who simply want more of what they love. *-BF*



Wipeout HD

System(s)	PS3 (PSN)	Publisher	Sony
Developer	Sony Liverpool	Available	May

Wipeout Pulse on PSP let me down, this big-brother-on-HD-steroids version of Wipeout is not letting me down. It would be very nice to see the formula shift into new territory, but Wipeout HD carries thrilling moments that push the game past its been-there trappings. The

presentation is so arresting on PS3: 60 fps in widescreen is a strong adrenaline shot to the recycled tracks, and if you have a killer sound system, the audio is a real standout. The verdict is out on motion control: it seems fine for the feel of the game, but I still have a stubborn urge to stick with analog in my games for now. *-BF*

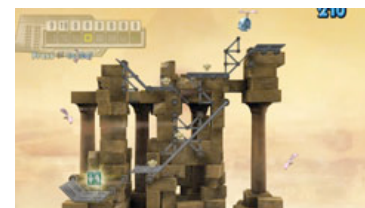
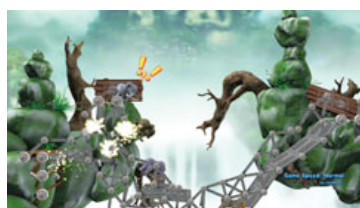


Elefunk

System(s)	PS3 (PSN)	Publisher	Sony
Developer	8bit	Available	May

multiple attempts were made by my friend and I to complete what was essentially the tutorial in Elefunk, an engineering puzzle game that is quite in a league of its own (at least from my perspective, I've never played anything like it.) It's not that the game is that hard, it's just that there is some redirecting the

way you normally approach a puzzle game. The object is to guide elephants safely across the bridge structure you create out of a variety of struts, bolts and beams—simple materials that go together in deviously complicated ways. You definitely gotta go in for this type of thing, but the reward can be quite enjoyable once you get into the more complicated areas. *-BF*

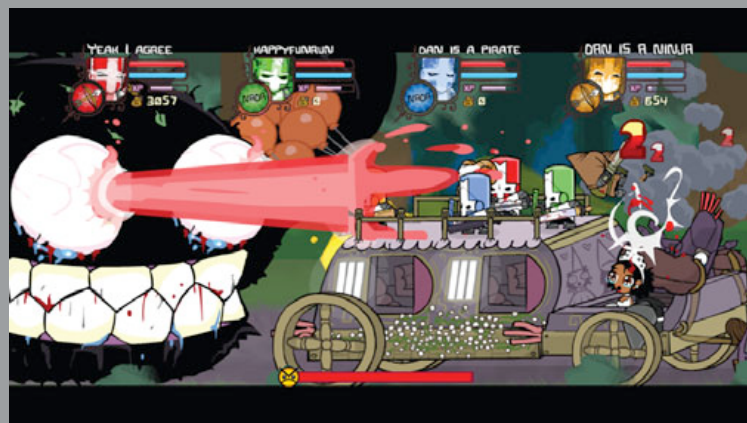
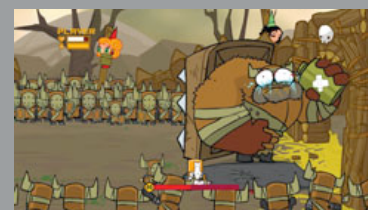


Castle Crashers

System(s)	Xbox 360 (XBLA)	Publisher	The Behemoth
Developer	The Behemoth	Available	Q3 2008

Coming this Summer to an Xbox 360 marketplace right near you, The Behemoth's Castle Crashers is the stuff of XBLA dreams, which is apropos since you can order it in bed. Castle Crashers stars four seemingly adorable knights (right up until they begin bludgeoning things to death, including each other) with individual elemental powers. Green releases poison, Red wields lightning, Blue of course handles the ice, and Orange torches the place with fire. Secondary weapons also come into play including a boomerang and a shovel for unearthing treasure (if you can find the time). There are also some 22 unlockable characters, a few of which you can check out on The Behemoths Castle Crashers Dev Blog, along with videos of their mad 2D skills in progress. Anyone who's played Alien Hominid—and not

jumped out a window (*psst, it's hard*)—can attest to The Behemoths penchant for mayhem, now just imagine it in a 1-4 player medieval cartoon massacre with sinfully gorgeous backgrounds, animation on everything the likes you've never seen, and layer upon layer of wonderful side scrolling. I'm as game for the odd time waster as the next person, but this is a game I'd gladly shell out \$49.99 for along with the gas money to get to my local game emporium. *-DH*



FF: My Life as King

It's good to be king

System(s)	Wii	Multi	NA
Developer	Square Enix	Available	May
Publisher	Nintendo	ESRB Rating	E

WiiWare kicks off with the world-building game Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: My Life as King. Not at all your typical FF, but an inviting concept for the niche set...



Boom Blox

Blocks are falling down

System(s)	Wii	Multi	1-4
Developer	EA LA	Available	May
Publisher	EA	ESRB Rating	E

Steven Spielberg's got more than Indiana Jones coming your way this summer: check out this Jenga-like puzzle game and behold the exploding falling blocks...

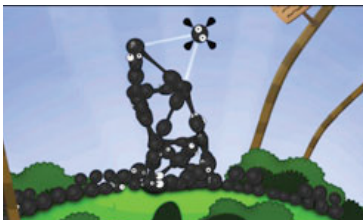


World of Goo

Eewwwhhh

System(s)	Wii	Multi	NA
Developer	2D Boy	Available	May
Publisher	WiiWare	ESRB Rating	E

Build structures out of goo balls and watch your feats of engineering hold up to the test. Puzzle games are starting to get awfully colorful these days...



Samba de Amigo

Shake it

System(s)	Wii	Multi	1-2
Developer	Gearbox	Available	August
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	E

Considering the Dreamcast's tragic and untimely death, such small delights as Samba de Amigo will live again. Please be careful not to shake the Wiimote too violently...



Wheelman

The man behind the wheel



System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC	Multi	NA
Developer	Midway/Tigon	Available	September
Publisher	Midway	ESRB Rating	TBA

Vin Diesel's involvement in The Chronicles of Riddick ended up fronting an awesome game, but can such awesomeness happen again in a driving action game?



Pure

Into the wild



System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	Multi	1-16
Developer	Blackrock Studio	Available	September
Publisher	Disney	ESRB Rating	TBA

With a virtual line of sight stretching 30 miles, Pure wants to give you a vertiginous experience as you nail tricks off mountain tops and boost to outrageous speeds...

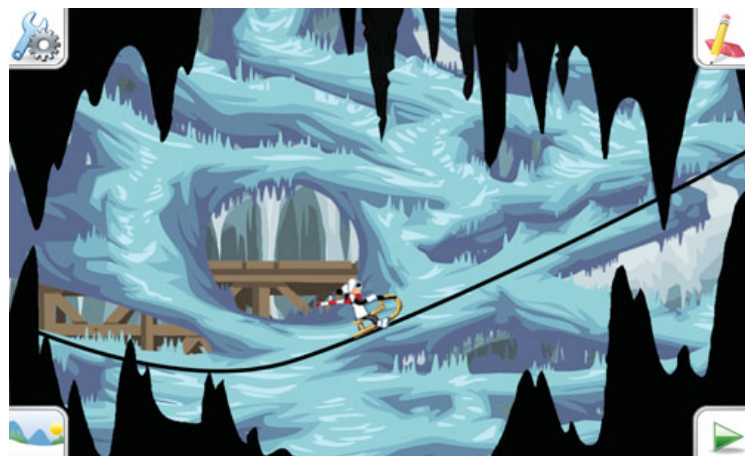


Line Rider 2: Unbound

Ride the line

System(s)	Wii	Multi	NA
Developer	Genius Products	Available	Spring
Publisher	InExile	ESRB Rating	E

Line Rider is the project of a Slovenian university student, where young Bosh and his sled look upon an empty canvas, waiting for your Wiimote to draw him a world...



Order Up

It's what's for dinner

System(s)	Wii	Multi	NA
Developer	SuperVillain Studios	Available	July
Publisher	Zoo Games	ESRB Rating	TBA

Customers come into your restaurant, they need fed, it's time for flipping burgers, tossing fries in the cooker, slicing condiments. Manage your resources and build a rep...



This Is Vegas

For real

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC	Multi	TBA
Developer	Surreal	Available	Q4 2008
Publisher	Midway	ESRB Rating	TBA

After you pound out a few moves on the dance floor in the rhythm game, head on over to the bar and spray down those young ladies with perfectly white T-shirts on...



Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway

War is indeed a highway to hell

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC	Multi	1-2
Developer	Gearbox	Available	August
Publisher	Ubisoft	ESRB Rating	TBA

And you thought World War II was fully tapped as a gaming theme! There's always room for an original take on the horrors of our past, especially on next-gen...



Golden Axe

Big game hunting

System(s)	Xbox 360/PS3	Multi	NA
Developer	Secret Level	Available	Fall
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	M

Before, during and now after wrapping up Iron Man, Secret Level have been seeing to it that Golden Axe: Beast Rider becomes their crowning jewel. Have a squint!

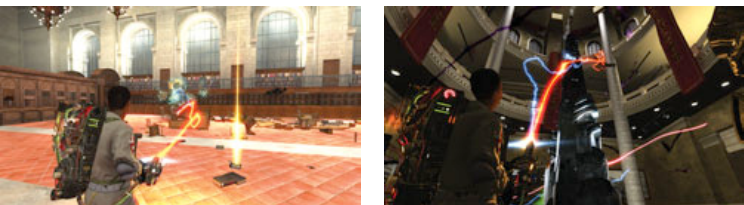


GhostBusters

Ghostbusting

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PS2, Wii, PC	Multi	TBA
Developer	Terminal Reality	Available	October
Publisher	Sierra	ESRB Rating	TBA

This game must turn out good, because it's probably the closest we're ever going to get to a GhostBusters sequel, which is what the game is consistently being touted as...



Silent Hill: Homecoming

We've missed you

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	Multi	NA
Developer	The Collective	Available	August
Publisher	Konami	ESRB Rating	M

The Silent Hill series has been on a steady decline some would say, and now that it's in the hands of an American studio, the scrutiny is gonna be that much thicker...





They

They like to kill, you shoot back

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC	Multi	TBA
Developer	IMC/Metropolis	Available	2009
Publisher	TBA	ESRB Rating	TBA

Little is known about They, a first-person sci-fi shooter being billed as a “mystery.” It does look like you’ll get to use guns to kill whatever “they” turns out to be...

Chocobo's Dungeon

Too cute, really

System(s)	Wii	Multi	1-2
Developer	Square Enix	Available	July
Publisher	Square Enix	ESRB Rating	E

Final fantasy fables: chocobo's dungeon involves swinging on a swing (see: below), as well as trekking through dungeons, confronting monsters through turn-based battles...

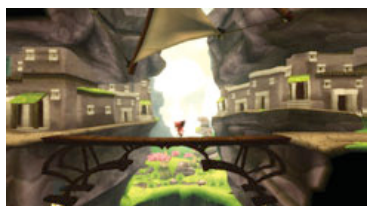
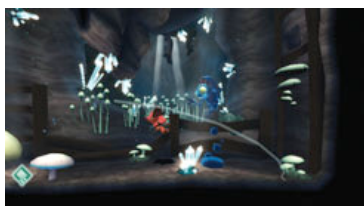


Lost Winds

A beautiful place to be

System(s)	Wii	Multi	NA
Developer	Frontier Developments	Available	TBA
Publisher	Frontier Developments	ESRB Rating	TBA

With the power of the wind, you guide a little friend through platforming perils in an gorgeous world of pure fantasy. This one really show the promise of WiiWare...

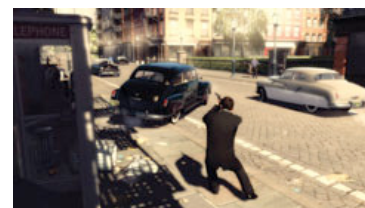


Mafia II

It's all about family

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC	Multi	NA
Developer	2K Games Czech	Available	Fall 2008
Publisher	2K Games	ESRB Rating	TBA

There's something charming about this time period, but don't go thinking this is some frothy Sunday-in-the-park simulator. You're part of a crime syndicate, guns blazing, cars crashing...



Fallout 3

The end of the world as we know it

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC	Multi	TBA
Developer	Bethesda	Available	Fall 2008
Publisher	Bethesda	ESRB Rating	TBA

The world isn't really much of a proper world anymore: what a perfect place to set a game, where death and decay roll around every corner. Fallout 3 is getting closer...



Prototype

Someone's pissed off

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC	Multi	NA
Developer	Radical	Available	October
Publisher	Sierra	ESRB Rating	TBA

As an indignant shapeshifter, your only course of action is to bring forth spikes to crush soldiers and jack tanks and continue to crush soldiers. This one's violent..



play Staff "Round-up"

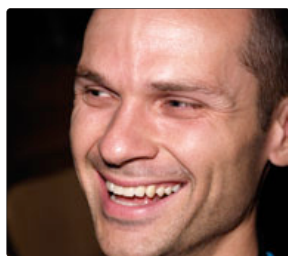


Dave Halverson
Publisher

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, sandbox, rhythm
Now playing: GTA IV, Mario Kart, Hellboy
If I had to pick one new system... Microsoft has Rare and Epic but Sony has Insomniac and Naughty Dog... I'd go PS3 for longevity then borrow a 360 and move.

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Mario Kart
GTA IV
Iron Man
Wii Fit
Commando
Wall-E
Hellboy
Speed Racer
Battle of the Bands



Brady Fiechter
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: PixelJunk, MKart
If I had to pick one new system... PS3 for now, PS3 for the future.

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Taoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Civilization: Revolution, Patapon
If I had to pick one new system... Xbox 360

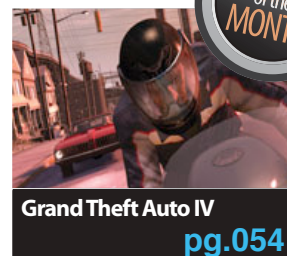
Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Age of Conan, GTA IV
If I had to pick one new system... PS3; I'll play most of the 360 games via PC versions

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Grand Theft Auto IV
pg.054

The play rating system

Read the text.



Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Vantage Master Portable, GTA IV
If I had to pick one new system... PS3

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.



Casey Loe
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Etrian Odyssey, Valkyria Chronicles
If I had to pick one new system... Xbox 360

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.



Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: GTA IV, Super Stardust HD
If I had to pick one new system... Brain says Xbox 360, heart says PS3.

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?



Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: GTA IV, The World Ends With You
If I had to pick one new system... If I could get all my friends to buy it, PS3; I hate the Xbox controller.

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.



Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Mario Kart Wii
If I had to pick one new system... Wii. None of these bozos picked it.

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Reviews

June 2008





Mario Kart Wii

Life is good in the fast lane

words Brady Fiechter

You know the drill: the insidious blue shell will take your ass out, and will do so often, explosively landing with an infuriating precision that is both evil frustration and outrageous fun. Here's where perspective takes over: are the blue shell and the generous other chaotic components found in MarioKart Wii a cheap anchor randomly tossed out to strip away victory from the most skilled drivers and offer favor to the weak, or is it all part of a deliberate and delicate balance that is exactly as it should be? Go ahead and sulk: the game has taken a bit of the pleasure out of finding a consistent racing line for a victory, the back of the pack is given an awfully generous assist, and mad dashes to the finish line can turn into a little too much

of a crap shoot (150cc is dumb), yet this entire fabric of deliberate mania is exactly why MarioKart Wii is so much fun; tune into its ways and you find the magic.

For every moment a blue shell gets in your face, for every moment something pathetic happens to temporarily knock you out of the heat of contention, there is the immense satisfaction of knowing you can very realistically turn right around and exact mirrored revenge in the next race—and yes, that revenge does carry enough element of focus that you still have to master plenty of rock-solid play mechanics for ultimate payoff; think about even the smaller things, like the sinking feeling you get from missing a power up at just the wrong moment, and the pleasure of watching the guy on your tail spinning out on the map thanks to a well-placed



banana.

The back-and-forth of triumph and loss is intense in MarioKart Wii, and while no doubt things have gotten more extreme than ever in this latest Kart, herein lies the grand appeal: The adrenaline rush comes not so much from brute skill as it does from interacting with the unhinged nature of it all. A racing purist could pick this game apart with a technical knife, but that would be missing its point: the ultimate curse-filled moments happen unexpectedly and defiantly, culminating into a fight, not race, for the final push to the finish.

It's MarioKart, folks—you know the drill. Where it switches up is in the bikes, which still are pretty much the karts with an extra function of a speed-boost wheelie and a drop in powerslide performance; they're a great addition, and I routinely default to the bikes. Speed has been given more of a push with linked trick boosts and omnipresent turbo pads quickening the pace. The removal of the triple-boost is not welcome yet forgivable, once you accept the redirection of the MarioKart vision. Don't accept it, and you'll be haunted by all the ways the game goes perceptively wrong.

MarioKart Wii does feel laid out to accommodate a less discerning audience, and if this is to be translated

“Don't accept it, and you'll be haunted by all the ways the game goes perceptively wrong.”

as compromise, well, there may be no arguing. But if the racing mechanic has been deadened, the added animations and stickier control give me a weightier connection to the personalities of the Nintendo characters and their rides. And while you're wishing you could hear people call you assmuncher over a mic while preparing some choice words of your own, I'm thrilled to merely see 11 human opponents gathering at the starting line, waiting for my blue shell.

Mario Kart Wii

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Nintendo
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	12 player online, ghosts, tournaments
ESRB Rating	E
Available	April

Giant bullet: good or bad depending on perspective

review

Grand Theft Auto

Fresh off the boat...

words Dave Halverson



I've always been critical of sandbox games. Even though they rank among my three favorite genres, the freedom and expanse they offer has always come at a hefty price, sacrificing fine detail, proper physics, and interactivity for sheer expanse. Invisible barriers, haphazard collision detection, blocky facades, and wooden protagonists have rained on many an open-world parade (although to Rockstar North's credit, nobody managed to strike such a perfect balance between expanse and gameplay on PS2 and Xbox as they did) until the current generation of consoles brought the possibility of having our metropolitan cake and eating it, too. *Saints Row*, the first open-world game on 360, fell short in many areas I'd hoped would see refinement. As powerful as these new consoles are, I

wondered if we were still a generation away from perfecting the sandbox experience.

The answer to that question came the moment Niko Bellic stepped off the boat. Of all of the refinements that I hoped current technology would bring to the GTA table, the one I held little to no hope for was dynamic collision, but there it was. Not only does Niko's stance conform to every angle and step in the game; his cadence changes on stairs and inclines, and his hands and arms even compensate should he hang from a sloped surface. For a game this size, this is an extraordinary feat; making the fact that he also leans realistically when he runs at an arch—something even the best of the best games miss—all the more praiseworthy. As the self-appointed spokesperson for the detriment of nonconforming appendages, I finally felt vindication was at hand, and this

was merely the tip of the new Liberty City iceberg.

The magnitude of refinement to the GTA aesthetic is so substantial that GTA IV is as much reinvention as it is sequel. Invisible barriers have melted away (if you can reach it, you can hop over it), the ability to hail a cab or take the train anytime, anywhere is a stroke of pure genius; drunkenness has become a feature of gameplay, restaurants and hot dog stands now replenish health, there's a cinematic camera at your fingertips, and the series' masterfully irreverent radio stations have given way to a veritable smorgasbord of GTA-style new media, including a Web browser and the best thing to happen to TV since HBO.

The amount of sub-content in the game is staggering. Picking up Michelle (Niko's main squeeze, who desperately needs a change of clothes) for our first date, I was amazed at how good the bowling game was, and later the equally impressive billiards sim. But it was the cabaret that sealed the deal. The game that revolutionized interactive urban mayhem has now redefined what a video game can be. Not only are we met with lifelike, in-game live entertainment, but the acts actually change upon your return. The strip club is another eye opener, where the third lap dance is definitely the charm, but you'll have to hit that with a friend. All the while, the core gameplay is superb. GTA has always focused on driving and action, although neither has ever truly excelled until now. The driving and especially riding are complemented by vehicle-specific handling characteristics, along with the addition of an e-brake for enhanced

cornering. Your mileage may vary but, in my opinion, city driving has never been so fun, and Rockstar make the most of it through the game's many intense car chases and timed events.

The real shocker, however, comes by way of two-wheeled transportation. Supersports, choppers, scooters, and motocross bikes are all yours for the taking and are a must in heavy traffic. But the reason I wasted countless hours watching cars whiz by while I looked for a bike—preferably a chopper—is because every one of Niko's friends will gladly hop on the back for the mission ahead. If you're so inclined, you can play most of the game on bikes, going where few cars dare. They also do cool wheelies and stoppies, and Niko's animation changes depending on the bike. Jack an MX bike, for instance, and he sticks his foot out around corners (there's no end to the game's painstaking nuances) and everyone has a magic helmet—you wanna be safe when you're firing automatic weapons in rush-hour traffic. The endless array of cars and trucks are awesome, too, especially when you get into the posh neighborhoods, as are forklifts, boats, helicopters...and just about anything else with an ignition. Every vehicle has an emphasis on control and physics, just like Niko himself. When he's not brandishing one of the game's many weapons, Niko gets down to business via a new melee combat system that finally brings the game's fighting up to snuff. Locking on with the L trigger, you can dodge, counter, disarm, punch, kick, and head-butt your opponent into submission. The armed combat has also



been overhauled, with the addition of wall-hugging for the many duck-and-cover set pieces, and a lock-on reticule for urban warfare and close-quarters shoot-outs that also depicts the victim's declining health. The range and diversity of the missions also run the gamut, on par with the technological advancements and strides in gameplay.

Bidding a not-so-fond farewell to those event-triggering colored circles, actions are initiated via cell phone, with the player choosing what to do and when, as Niko's phonebook grows and in-box fills. You can answer a call or let it go to message, accepting or declining various invitations while choosing between jobs and key missions to forward the story at your leisure. Maybe you want to shop (although the clothing stores are kinda sucky) or stay in and watch some TV. No matter how you choose to play the game, the AI keeps good pace with the story.

The out-of-context, arbitrary minutia that has plagued the genre (see Mass Effect) is no more, and the protagonist no longer a passive observer. Niko is as close to a living, breathing character as we've ever come. He arrives in America with a single acquaintance (Cousin Roman) and no illusions about his proclivity for violence. He'll do just about anything to achieve his ultimate goal, but still manages to come across as sympathetic; the victim of a troubled life and the scars of war. He's got all the complexity you'd find in a great movie script, along with a supporting cast that's exactly that, rather than disposable fodder to advance the story. The layers of dialogue and people he befriends along the way put GTA IV in a class by itself. On one hand, you're playing this massive, utterly gorgeous driving/action game, while on the other you're embroiled in a Scorsese-esque, true-to-life chain-of-events crime

"The magnitude of refinement to the GTA aesthetic is so substantial that GTA IV is as much reinvention as it is sequel."



IV



What's in the bag.



drama. The old GTA, where punching civilians and running down hookers was all part of the charm, is no more. Not only would that seem completely out of context here, but you'd also be quickly apprehended by the Liberty City PD, which has apparently been busy recruiting new cops since 2001.

Another key (make that very key) factor in the appeal of IV is the absence of any over-the-top racial stereotypes. Niko and Roman are Russian, but they don't go around chugging Stolli and munching herring, and the various people they meet, while plenty colorful, don't overstate their ethnicity. In short, I can't imagine how they could have made the game any better. Going in, I couldn't see myself getting behind a Russian immigrant in the leading role, but now I can't imagine a better choice, and I can't stress enough the level of visual splendor on display. Beyond the obvious eye candy, like cascading rain, reflections, shimmering water (Niko can

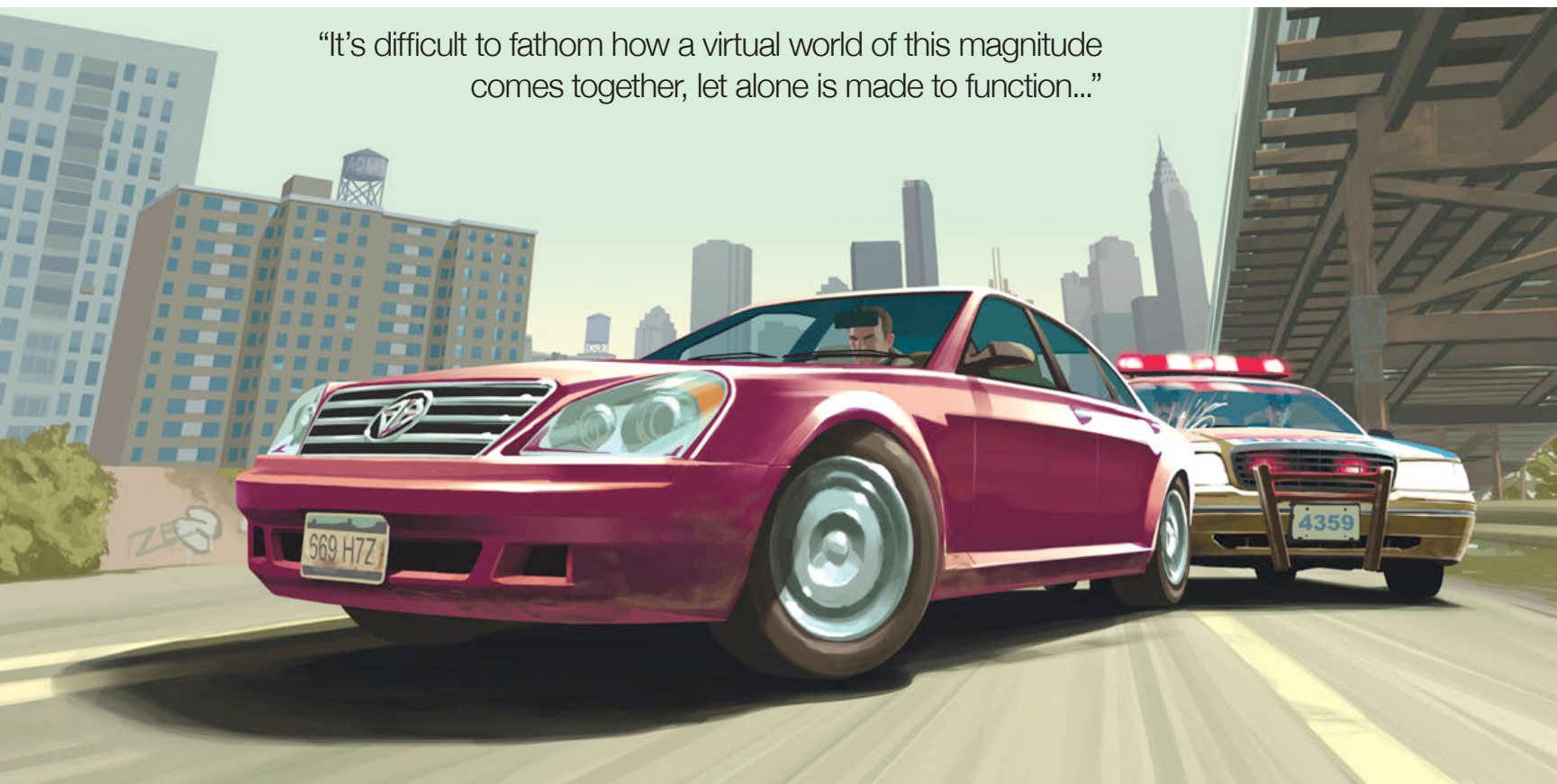
swim, too), and generous normal mapping, subtle touches like cracks in sidewalks and randomly eroded streets depict a rare level of authenticity reserved for much smaller-scale games. There's still the odd painted-on face in the crowd, but given the size of the game, the visual integrity is dumbfounding. Just when thought I'd seen everything the new engine had to offer, I found myself riding through the Liberty City version of Times Square at night in utter disbelief...you'll see when you get there. It's difficult to fathom how a virtual world of this magnitude comes together, let alone is made to function with all of the realism that today's technology affords. GTA IV is to the current state of gaming what GTA III was back in 2001, only now, thanks to the advent of gaming as a fixture in American entertainment, more people than ever will get the opportunity to look beyond any residual controversy and enjoy the true spectacle of modern gaming at its finest.

Grand Theft Auto IV

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Rockstar North
Publisher	Rockstar
Online/Multi	Various modes and content via Xbox Live
ESRB Rating	M
Available	April 29

review

"It's difficult to fathom how a virtual world of this magnitude comes together, let alone is made to function..."





Iron Man

He's super, man

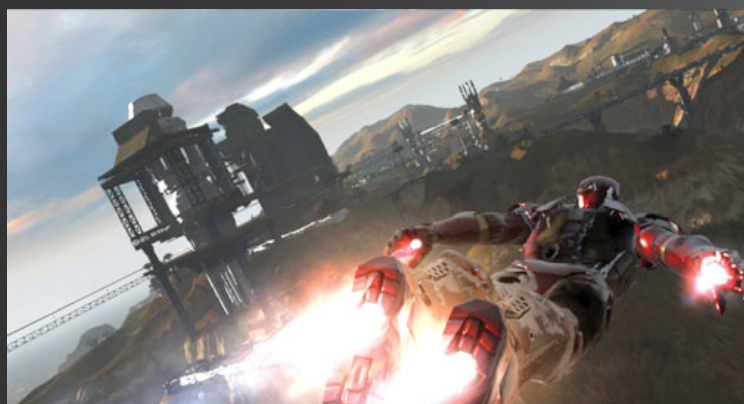
words Dave Halverson

If someone would have told me a few years back that Iron Man would become Marvel's next big-screen adaptation, I might have agreed, but with Robert Downey Jr. in the lead role? Yeah right, and Edward Norton is going to play the Incredible Hulk. That triple-A actors have become the norm in comic book movies is one of the few signs that humanity is worth saving—although hearing the man who played Wayne Gale bark out video game clichés is a bit unsettling. The stars don't fare so well in the games pre-rendered cut-scenes either, where Gwyneth now sports huge knockers, and RDJ looks like he's been storing nuts in his cheeks. But we're not here for the ancillary baggage; we're gathered here today to blow shit up.

If Golden Axe was delayed so that Secret Level could pop out a movie game, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise, allowing them to work any bugs out of their engine, the first of which crawls into the first mission with eight hairy legs. Setting out in the prototype suit on foot, things look good enough, but the engine appears shaky and almost devoid of collision detection. Push Iron Man against a two-foot-high wall and he'll simply glitch over it; punch an armored

vehicle and regardless of your proximity, it produces the same canned explosion; blast a stream of the lethal flames you're using to fry soldiers at a wood fence or guard tower and it doesn't even leave a mark...details, details. If you've come to run 'n' gun, no worries, but if you're a stickler for details, well...let's go flying.

Following the compulsory flight training, Iron Man takes to the skies, where, although initially rough around the edges, the core gameplay begins to kick in, divided between hovering, flying, boosting, shooting, dodging, intercepting and redirecting missiles, and pressing the requisite button in the vicinity of enemy aircraft to bring about various quick time events or bring them down as swarms of air and ground enemies take aim. Despite a lack of close proximity detail Iron Man is definitely at home in the air, where a fine shooter develops, ramping up nicely in accord with the suits themselves. The freedom afforded by the massive open environments makes for some epic scenarios, in conjunction with the many system upgrades and enhancements available between missions. The ability to tweak every aspect of your suit, coupled with the freedom to have it your way—picking away at targets via fly-bys,



"Following the obligatory training Iron Man takes to the skies where, although still rough around the edges, the core gameplay begins to kick in..."



hovering, ground attacks, or a combination of techniques—also makes Iron Man an extremely user-friendly experience. After such a bumpy start, I was pleasantly surprised that Secret Level pulled it out.

I'm not wild about the obligatory action soundtrack or redoing entire missions should you fall to a boss, but then again, it's almost hard to "die," and the addicting nature of the flying dynamic ultimately saves the day. As movie games go, Iron Man may not be in the same class as Hellboy, Wall-E, or Kung Fu Panda, but few movie games are. What it lacks in polish, it makes up for as a nicely nuanced shooter that's both man-bulge and cape free.

Air traffic control, Iron Man style.

Iron Man

System(s)	Xbox 360 (reviewed), Wii, PSP, PS2, PS3
Developer	Secret Level
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	T
Available	Out Now

review

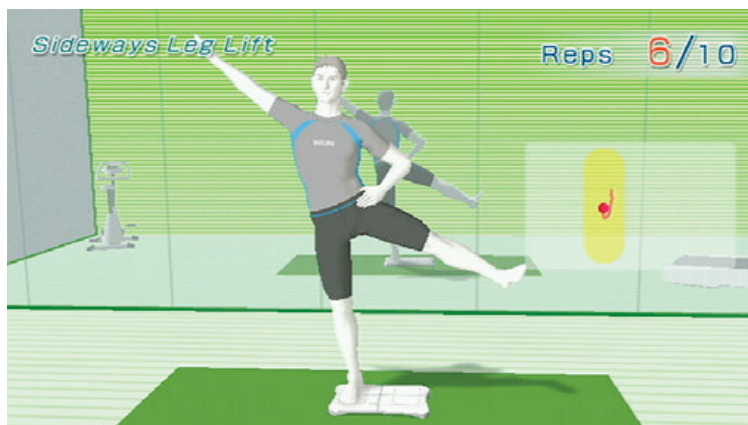
Wii Fit

Not quite Yoga Flame

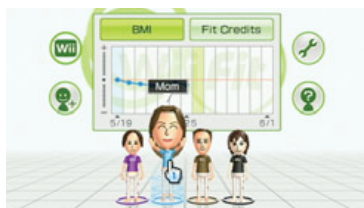
words Heather Campbell



“Wii Fit is not a videogame. It is fitness software.”



Like most Nintendo products, the Balance Board features good industrial design.



I think the Wii Fit Balance Board may be the most clearly targeted accessory in the history of gaming.

The Wii has succeeded because of novelty. Nintendo has marketed their console to families, non-gamers, casual fans, women, and the elderly, and the Balance Board—which is a scale of multiple sensors—is designed to keep the newness of the Wii alive in the households that have grown tired of Wii Sports. It is the Wiimote, turned inside out and stretched out over the floor. You look at it and are unimpressed. Like the Wiimote itself (designed as a stick with a single button—and then compromised with additional inputs), the Balance Board is supposed to suggest to the player: Stand on me, and you can go.

The Balance Board is a giant, analog A button. Press it with your whole body to begin. And Wii Fit is a collection of about 40 activities which demonstrate the functions of the Balance Board. It is a nonthreatening exercise program that tracks your stats and encourages strength training and balance. Wii Fit is not a videogame. It is fitness software.

For the last two weeks, I've been using Wii Fit. I am lazy. I hate exercise. I am slender because I have decent eating habits. Simply: I am not a pig. However, 10 sit-ups leave me gasping for air, and six push-ups are almost unthinkable. Wii Fit kept me coming back because of guilt, like a membership to a gym for those first two months. It's more fun than a gym, but less encouraging. Also, since muscle weighs more than fat, it can be misleading as you work out. I put on three pounds while working with Wii Fit, even though my goal was to lose three. It was depressing to watch my BMI graph increase. Staring at myself in the mirror, I wondered if I was getting any more trim, or if I had been eating more because of the increase in physical activity.

Taken, uncensored, from my daily diary of Wii Fit exercises:

Day Five: My Wii Fit Age has increased six years. Starting to get depressed. How can my balance be getting worse? Two weeks ago, when previewing the game at a Nintendo event, my Fit Age was two years younger than my actual age. My weight is going up, too, for the first time since I've been doing these workouts. Arms and stomach are tired, and I wish there was a way to turn off the music.

Day Eight: My weight has increased, my

balance decreased. There's no way to know if I'm getting toned, but my Wii Counselor tells me that I'm getting weaker. Still, I've managed to increase my push-ups from six to 10 (and I was REALLY struggling with six when I began). Who knows what this means?

I have some minor complaints about Wii Fit. The first is the default setting for the menus after each exercise. At the end of every activity, you're given the choice to Quit or Retry. Assuming you're going through the entire program, having Retry as the default selection is confounding; what's worse is that the only way to get out of an exercise is to pause the software and select Quit (again, not the default). The second complaint is that you need to have pockets to use Wii Fit. In order to use the Balance Board safely, you have to clear the area around you while you work out...which means there's no place to put the Wiimote while you're balancing on one leg with your hands above your head.

Reviewing Wii Fit is like reviewing someone's habits. You're only going to get as much out of it as you put in. Does Wii Fit encourage better health? Absolutely, yes. But will it make you an exercise junkie if you're lazy? No. In my opinion, there's no way to score it, either. It does what it proposes, but is essentially a piece of exercise equipment. I can't give a score to a treadmill any more than I can tell you whether Wii Fit is right for you. I wish there was an online stat-trading feature, so that you could exercise with your friends (maybe this would encourage more competition). I wish you could turn off the music. I wish I wasn't so lazy. But that's not Wii Fit's fault. Maybe in two months, I'll be running two miles every morning, pounding out 30 push-ups on the Board, and happily checking out my stomach in the mirror every night before I go to bed. Or maybe I'm ashamed because I've already broken the 30-minute workout habit after only two weeks.

Wii Fit

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Nintendo
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	No
ESRB Rating	E
Available	May 19, 2008

review

Wolf of the Battlefield: Commando 3

Are you wolf enough?

words Brady Fiechter



If you spot that “Wolf of the Battlefield” is the English translation of Senjou No Ookami—the Japanese title of Commando on the ancient NES/arcade—I hereby christen you an exceptional human being, as well as a likely candidate to enjoy this first release in Capcom’s line of retro rebirths. Wolf of the Battlefield: Commando 3 is full-on 3-D in glorious HD, but the gameplay is full-on NES-era simplicity, almost to a fault. Go into the option screen and receive advice on how to play, and you’ll be prompted with a list of short instructions that literally say: Shoot moving targets, and if target doesn’t move but looks big and tough, maybe use a grenade.

That purely basic structure of play is exactly what I wanted out of this capable shooter, and going in with a hunger for that distinctly pattern-based action of yesteryear certainly helped soften some of the game’s thorny shortcomings.

Wolf of the Battlefield: Commando 3 follows the story of a trio of mercenary types who, as far as I can tell, were born to

unload their weapons while avoiding fairly intricate bullet streams from a massive GI Joe bad-guy brigade. These bad guys seem a bit underfunded, because even though they’re massive in number, they really don’t offer much of a variety of resistance—but that’s okay in the end, because it’s mighty fun shooting them.

Death comes by a few main weapon types: a spread-like gun (invoking Contra is not a bad thing), machine gun, rocket launcher, and the deliciously satisfying roasting of the flamethrower. A super shot, known as the “M-Crash,” brings total annihilation across the screen when you’re in a pinch; throw in grenades—a bit awkwardly restrictive in their use—and you’ve got the ammunition needed to plow through machine gunners, jeeps, tanks, foot soldiers, and boss battles, which begin with a menacing contraption called Boss, facing you down while you chip away at a slowly diminishing life bar.

Commando 3 keeps it bare bones and stripped down, a little too sterile and lifeless at times. It’s one thing to pay homage to original ideas, but by

“...going in with a hunger for that distinctly pattern-based action of yesteryear certainly helped soften some of the game’s thorny shortcomings.”

mechanically framing levels across the usual-suspects (jungles are still cool though) feels less like nostalgia and more like banality by the end. It’s tough to get a feel for what a \$10 downloadable game is ultimately supposed to deliver, and in the case of Commando 3, there is a sense that more attention to detail and tighter design has nothing to do with budget and more to do with approach.

Whatever is expected from a game like this, to this player, the engagement of the dual-analog action above all else did its job admirably. One of the game’s central gameplay hooks invites you to keep a combo meter building as long as you don’t get hit; it’s been a long time since I felt such an intense frustration losing a hit-string like this, my character grunting along with my frustration—and for that alone, Commando 3 carried me and my co-op friend to a satisfied end.

More games like this, please.

Wolf of the Battlefield: Commando 3

System(s)	PSN, XBLA
Developer	Backbone
Publisher	Capcom
Online/Multi	Obviously
ESRB Rating	T
Available	May

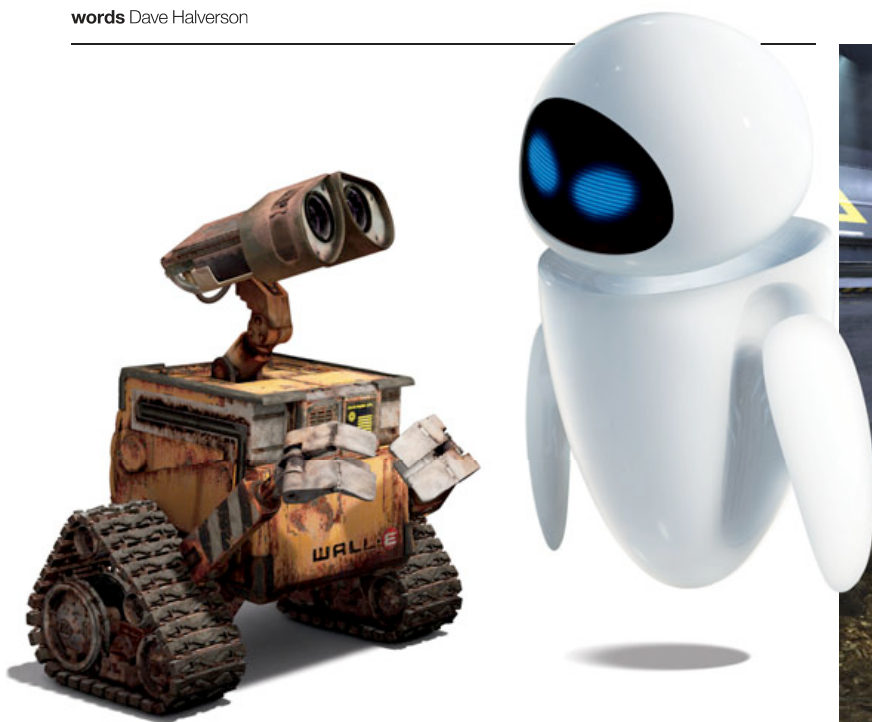


The war at home:
Yours for under
the price of 3
gallons of gas.

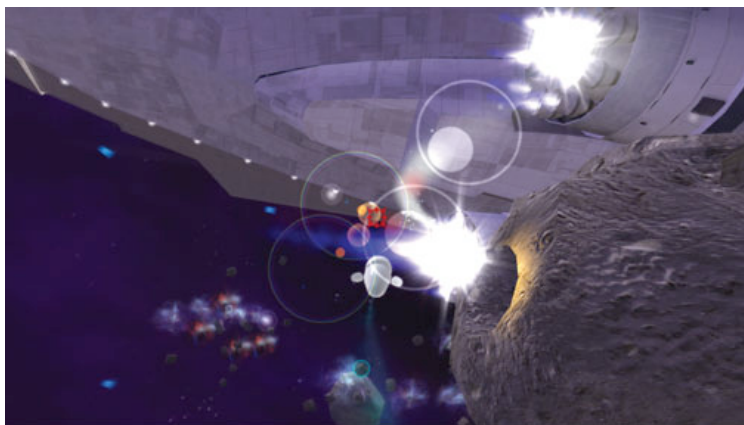
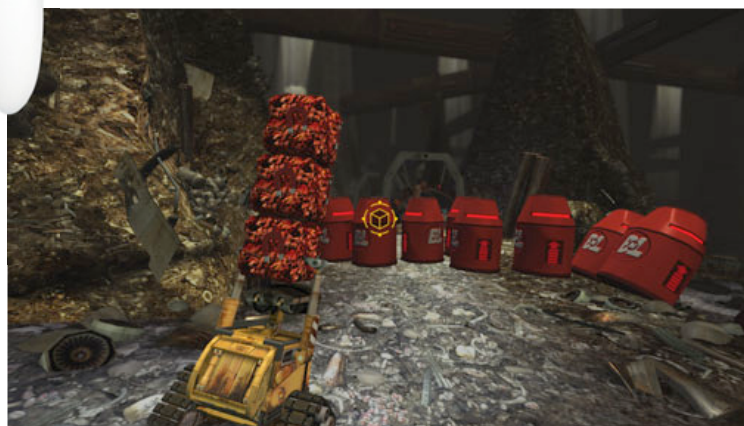
WALL·E

Get trashed

words Dave Halverson



“Wall-E’s perky demeanor and satisfying control make the act of scooting around and popping into a cube surprisingly gratifying.”



If you think Wall-E looks irresistible in all those trailers, wait until you get your hands on him. As fun and wildly imaginative as Heavy Iron’s game is, Wall-E’s perky demeanor and satisfying control make the act of scooting around and popping into a cube surprisingly gratifying. Pressing L brings the camera in close, producing an instant bond between man and quite possibly the most adorable machine ever created. But there’s a city full of rubbish to forage, and you’ve got the place all to yourself, so whiz on over to the first machination and start heaving stuff.

Initially the goal in Wall-E is pretty much just being Wall-E, cubing trash to hurl at targets as a means of progression through a series of clever platforming and physics challenges amid the desolation of New York City...at least until Eve shows up. As hard as it is to part with Wall-E (you’ll be back together soon enough), once you come to grips with Eve’s flight-sim-style, reverse vertical axis control, her target-shooting and speed drills are as awe-inspiring as they are wickedly fun. Set within gorgeous open areas connected by networks of twisting corridors and tunnels (where you control the speed), she loves to fly and it



Eve gives Wall-E a lift. Is it love or AI?

first boss together, too. This also happens to be the end of your stint on Earth, which is over way to soon. But Eve's in trouble, so it's off to save the girl. Arriving in space, where mankind has become an automated, gluttonous, gelatinous race of chair potatoes, Wall-E gets a gun and the game shifts into a respectable third-robot shooter combined with more clever physics and puzzle action scenarios, and, of course, Eve doing her best Luke Skywalker impression. The spaceship levels are longer and more challenging than anything on Earth—stewards are bad robots—making the middle of the game pretty meaty, but it's the final three levels that really steal the show.

Heavy Iron place a huge emphasis on cause-and-effect progression throughout by way of strategically positioned rubbish dispensers, with which Wall-E can compress the game's refuse into an array of defensive and offensive cubes. Heavy cubes, light cubes, power cubes, magnetic cubes...you get the picture. Three-sided bridges called "tumblers" are another smart contrivance, especially later in the game and when it comes to finding the well-hidden collectibles. Wall-E's ability to transform into an inanimate cube is also put to good use via the game's platforming and plentiful magnetic conveyances and tumblers. If there's one word to describe the gameplay, it would be "busy."

Like everything Heavy Iron make, Wall-E is a great playing game first—and the fact that it's also gorgeous will make it seem to go by at double speed. Other than a few repetitive sound bites, it's everything I could ask for for my movie-derivative dollar; however, I did find it difficult going from the 360 to the Wii...okay—impossible. If all you have is a Wii and you never see the 360 or PS3 version, then you'll be just fine—Heavy Iron do a good job making the Wii shine, and the addition of Wii-centric controls and minigames absolutely cushions the blow. When it comes to multi-console games of this nature, you really can't compare. With so many great Wii exclusives on the shelves, it's really a two-system world.

shows—but the best is still yet to come.

Next up is the game's co-op "you scratch my chassis, I'll scratch yours" tandem play, a brilliant combination of boost and hover platforming and shooting where the control seamlessly transfers from Wall-E to Eve whenever Wall-E uses Y to jump. The moment he comes into contact with Eve she takes control, safely delivering him across chasms he could never manage on his own. Two AI systems in cyberlove playing together...I could do this stuff all day.

Wall-E and Eve confront the game's

Wall-E

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, Wii, DS, PSP, PS2, Mac, PC
Developer	Heavy Iron
Publisher	THQ
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	E
Available	June 24

review



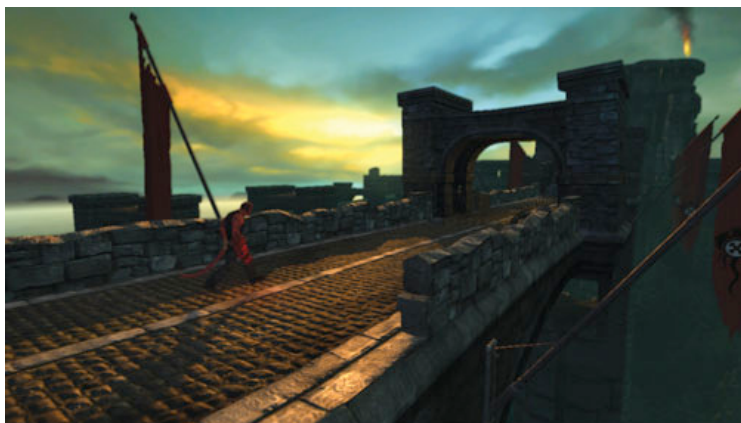
HELLBOY

Science of Evil

A gift from below

words Dave Halverson

this time last year (late May), I was writing our June cover story on *Hellboy: The Science of Evil*, which was set for a holiday '07 release. My preview build was far from complete, but for pre-alpha code four to five months from completion the release seemed ahead of schedule if anything, based on the typical 18-month development cycle allotted to most comic book or movie adaptations. So why am I sitting here a year later finally watching the end credits roll? Before I started playing *Science of Evil*, I presumed it was because Konami decided to time the release closer to *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, but judging



by the state of the game I just finished (which I can't wait to play through again with all of the abilities I unlocked) it's more likely that Krome Studios spent the last year making *Hellboy* a great game. Beginning in present-day Romania before zigzagging through Japan circa 1982, back to Romania, on to Tunisia 1967, and finally to present-day Eastern Europe, each of the six vignettes is divided into five gorgeous levels, drenched in superb architecture, texturing, and ambience. Krome employ fixed camera positions to give the game a striking cinematic aura, but do so without the usual caveats, pulling back and zooming in perfect harmony with the game's tapestry of interiors and exteriors. The creature designs are also exemplary, varied from area to area, and most of all, evil to the core—unholy Nazi abominations abound. The action is firmly rooted in combat, utilizing the Samaritan to stop creatures that won't go down except by firing the appropriate really big bullet, and the Right Hand of Doom to pound, slam, and crush anything that stands in his way. This is where the game truly sparkles. The superhuman force of Hellboy's blows land with crackling precision emanating streams of light like a fiery comet, and once a creature is stunned, he can snatch it like a rubber chicken to perform a myriad of punishment—or for bigger beasts, initiate a simple quick time event to elaborate their demise. He also has a wicked flying uppercut and charge attack, along with a proclivity for punting detached heads.

As great as the combat is, it's only half the draw. Room-clearing this is not. Seamless in-engine cut-scenes, mild exploration, action puzzles, and



“The creature designs are also exemplary, varied from area to area, and most of all, evil to the core...”

completely destructible environments add a significant measure of adventure to the proceedings. And if he can't break it he can probably pick it up and either throw or swing it. Hellboy likes to talk it up too, and Ron Perlman does a superb job with the surprisingly well written dialogue. The ambient soundtrack is also right on the money. Plunging deeper still, there's a two-player mode on offer, via split screen or over Live/PSN featuring Liz, Hellboy's fire-wielding girlfriend—and the PS3 version was actually made for the PS3! Imagine that. The quintessential Hellboy game has finally arrived.

Hellboy: Science of Evil

review

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PSP
Developer	Krome Studios
Publisher	Konami
Online/Multi	2 Player co-op
ESRB Rating	M
Available	June 24



Battle of the Bands

Loco in the Cabeza

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	Wii	Multi	2-player versus
Developer	Planet Moon	Available	Out Now
Publisher	THQ	ESRB Rating	T

It ain't Armed and Dangerous, but it's still good to see Planet Moon doing their decidedly off-kilter thing, which now includes beat games. Don't worry about holding your instrument though (you know you'll go blind, right?), because these beats require you to stab, strike left and right, and shake the Wiimote using B to block incoming attacks. It's kind of like a boss battle in Guitar Hero that never ends, only with "Face-Offs" (consecutive attacks on every beat), wicked humor, and wholesale lampoonery as rock, country, hip-hop, Latin, and, yes, marching bands try to kill each other. The game's theme? Insane in the membrane, of course. Don't expect nu-metal and geezer bands, either; you'll be beating it to the likes of "Una Mas Cerveza," "Dum Diddy," "Black Betty," "Feel Good Inc.," and other such avant-garde tunage. The cool bit about the

songs is the mish-mash aspect provided by the different genres. Which ever band is dominating the battle determines the style of the song, so if the Scaryachis (a zombie mariachi band) are dominating Silence Asylum (a goth rock band) you get a Latin version of the song on play, with the rock layer emerging whenever Silence Asylum takes the lead. Imagine a marching band version of "Photograph"...things can get pretty funky. On the visual side, the character designs are super cool, but the game looks three years old, which was either the plan or due to taut purse strings. There are far too few venues as well, especially considering the nature of the progression. This is a great idea for a game under utilized and under powered, which is surprising given Planet Moons pedigree. There's no easier genre when it comes to visuals so it's puzzling why its both low-tech and limited. Perhaps they're testing the waters.

Missed opportunity: If only BotB didn't look like a PS2 game and had more animation, it could have been great.



Speed Racer

Car-Fu you!

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	Wii	Multi	NA
Developer	Sidhe	Available	Out Now
Publisher	Warner Bros. Games	ESRB Rating	E

Sidhe's Speed Racer has a hook—a big, shiny, hook—called Car-Fu, the video game term for the movie's extreme stunts, adapted into a Wiimote-tilting racer. It's a good hook to, because other than Car-Fu (I'm gonna say that word until a piano falls on my head) the game relies solely on expanded venues and simplistic straight

ahead racing. I've seen the film (A+) and to it right you'd need a few million dollars and a gifted 360/PS3 team to even come close. With 12 months and the Wii to work with, Sidhe did well, incorporating serpentine psychedelic tracks and impressive car models into a World Racing League series of races with an ever burgeoning emphasis on Car-Fu, in cooperation with handling and boost. The steering has a soft feel, almost as if you're magnetized to the track, so mastering the control is easy and crashing actually kinda' hard, so winning usually comes down to well-timed boosting and (last time, I promise) Car-Fu: shunting, boost-bashing, spinning, tail-tossing...it's like a fighting game on wheels. Do I wish Speed Racer had a big-budget, shiny HD game? And how! But Sidhe's done a great job under the circumstances creating a one-of-a-kind racer, for a one-of-a-kind movie.



Shooting the tube in the Mach 6 as Trixie zooms by.



Emergency Mayhem

Somebody call 911

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	Wii	Multi	1-4
Developer	Supersonic	Available	Out Now
Publisher	Codemasters	ESRB Rating	T

Nothing wrong with a collection of minigames, and to answer the criticism that “casual” games are being misread by the rabid hardcore community, well, it’s because some people actually know when they’re being fed a load of crap. This, to be fair, is not the description for Emergency Mayhem; I like some of its ideas, and wanted to give it a shot because of the capable premise of taking emergency vehicles into the chaos of duty. What ultimately transpires is an awkward, thread-bear offering that even the most casual of gamer is going to question.

Hail To The Chimp

Respect

words Greg Orlando

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	Multi	1-4
Developer	Wideload Games	Available	June
Publisher	Gamecock	ESRB Rating	T

It takes a good bit of stones to make a game based on a throwaway joke in The Simpsons, but Wideload has done just that with its minigame-laden Hail to the Chimp. Even at its worst, Chimp provides a heretofore unseen dignity and tactful honesty to the matter of electing a new president. In a year where the masses bleat like sheep for change without actually caring what the candidates mean by change, it’s good to know Floyd the walrus is prepared to collect the clams, knock his fellow beasts into the lava, and take the oath of office.



NBA Ballers: Chosen One

Flat

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	Multi	1-2
Developer	Midway	Available	Out Now
Publisher	Midway	ESRB Rating	E

about now the designers behind the NBA Street franchise could use a little outside pressure to get their stalling game of fantasy hoops back in top form, but NBA Ballers: Chosen One is not that pressure. Even before you strain to dig into the game’s dodgy mechanics, the flat presentation keeps you at such a distance that there isn’t much motivation to go past a few quick games. The concept behind the game kind of rocks, the execution simply isn’t next-gen material.



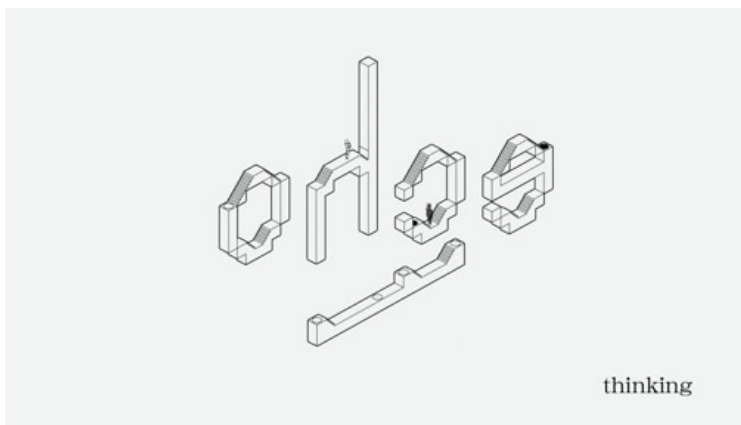
Echochrome

Mind warp

words Eric L. Patterson

System(s)	PS3 (PSN)	Multi	NA
Developer	Japan Studio	Available	May
Publisher	SCEA	ESRB Rating	E

based on Jun Fujiki’s “OLE Coordinate System,” echochrome was a game I knew I needed to play from the moment it debuted at E3 2007. Every stage is a visual puzzle in the truest sense: how the world is perceived from its current perspective and angle is how it works, so by rotating and re-positioning the level around your character, you create paths and access points to reach your goals where before none existed. It’s the type of game that will make you feel like a moron one moment, and a master the next; and that, indeed, is its beauty. Well, that, and the wonderfully stylish visual look it sports.



Final Fantasy IV

Spoony Bard: The Return

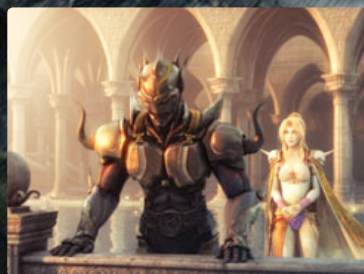
words Heather Campbell

after the stellar remake of Final Fantasy III, it was quietly suggested that Matrix Software remake IV, V, and VI with their beautiful 3-D game engine and grace the DS with all of the Super Famicom era's Final Fantasy games. Or at least that's the rumor. Whether or not we see the next two games, this one is most certainly here, to our delight. An entire new generation of players is going to get to dig their hands into one of gaming's treasures: Final Fantasy IV.

Heralded at the time for its groundbreaking story, the simple yet deeply memorable construction of its music and the advent of the Active Time Battle system, Final Fantasy IV may be the game that made Final Fantasy stick. What's more, the remake adds CG cut-scenes with—get this—voice acting for the DS release, plus additional quests (based on sections of the SNES script that had to be cut) that weren't included in the original. The soundtrack is remixed, and wireless DS-to-DS battles are promised as well (though I had no way to test this feature in my preview). Oh! There's a new ability system—the “Augment System”—that allows players to swap abilities between characters. And finally, the menus have been streamlined to allow easier access to typical spells or attacks, and players can customize them as they see fit. Big fan of “protect”? You can set it to your main character menu.

There's been enough revamp here that I'm sure I'm missing something. Did I mention the Eidolon-leveling minigames? Or how about the charming new feature of the sub-menus, which lets you peruse the thoughts of your party characters?

For those who haven't been introduced to this (some would say) darkest Final Fantasy game, the story is centered on a



Dark Knight named Cecil. Heralding from the kingdom of Baron, Cecil is the “Lord Captain” of his country's elite force of soldiers, known as the Red Wings. When Cecil begins to suspect that he's working for the forces of evil, he is torn between loyalty to his king and the clear call of his conscience. Soon, Cecil has been exiled from his command, and has set out on an adventure that will pit him against former allies...and himself.

The look of the game is nearly identical to Matrix's previous Final Fantasy remake, but with seemingly more detail poured into the main characters, allowing for more subtle movements and emotional shifts. It's not in-game cinema magic, but considering the hardware that's pumping out the program, the graphics are pretty remarkable.



Let the fray begin!

Oftentimes when playing retro titles, you realize that the game you recalled hasn't aged so well. With these Final Fantasy DS remakes, you get the delightful chance to return to old games...and find them better than you remembered.

Final Fantasy IV

preview

System(s)	DS
Developer	Matrix Software
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	NA
Available	July 22, 2008

“There's been enough revamp here that I'm sure I'm missing something.”



"Thanks to Xbox Live Arcade, we were able to distribute Ikaruga worldwide and achieve very high sales."



INTERVIEW

President, Treasure
Masato Maegawa

What prompted doing a Bangai-O sequel on DS?

When we thought about what we wanted to make, it was simply more Bangai-O. Even before ESP asked us to develop it, we were already in the process of making this game.

I have an obvious question, which will perhaps get an obvious answer: Why do the game on DS?

The reason we chose the DS is because we had the opportunity to use the stylus for a level editor. When deciding to make a 2-D action game, it is natural to choose the DS as the platform, too.

Would you consider this the best version of Bangai-O or merely a different one?

We look at Bangai-O Spirits as a game that has advanced directly from the previous Bangai-O. We have absorbed elements from the previous title, but this time we have thought of opportunities to progress by adding other ways of having fun with the game.

The ability to transfer game data through sounds—what got you guys interested in incorporating such a unique feature?

We reached this conclusion by looking at the technology behind sound data transfer from a different perspective. This was common technology during the 1980s, but utilizing it on the DS turned out to be a very unique idea for modern gamers.

Just how important is innovation to Treasure? Does the idea of creating a game on Wii and using the motion-sensing controls seem like an exciting proposition?

The Wii controller itself is an innovative controller. Not only do we want to use the controller in a normal way, we would like to come up with more innovative ways to utilize the whole Wii system.

You guys have always made incredibly distinct, personalized games that really hold on to 2-D design sensibilities. With Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network growing in popularity and bringing back that old-school spirit, what are your thoughts on taking your talents to this side of



indie-influenced game making?

Thanks to Xbox Live Arcade, we were able to distribute Ikaruga worldwide and achieve very high sales. I feel that this not only demonstrates the sheer size of this potential market, it also shows that it is a viable space for creating fun, classic games.

Is your focus more on pleasing the Japanese audience? Just how much focus do you place on pleasing the Western gamer's tastes?

Due to our company having a higher fan base outside of Japan, we constantly think about this, and feel the need to consider our fans overseas when developing a game.

One more question: There's an interesting divide happening between a more classically spun game revival—indie games are really growing—and the big-budget, next-generation games. Does Treasure seem more interested in sticking with smaller scale games, or do you find more excitement in the thought of making a big PS3 or Xbox 360 title?

Certainly our company is thinking about differentiation of this divide. We plan to develop games in each category by joining hands with publishers on both big-scale, larger-budget games as well as splendid games like Bangai-O Spirits, where we investigate and revisit classic games.



Bangai-O your head!

BANGAI-O SPIRITS

バンガイオー魂

Mining for buried treasure

words play staff

Now that you've got your fix of Ikaruga on XBLA (if such a fix can occur to any hardcore shooter fan), step up to the DS and check out Treasure's update of another strange and original shooter, Bangai-O Spirits, continued from the N64/DC originals. Treasure president Masato Maegawa gives us a little rundown on their latest.

Bangai-O Spirits

preview

System(s)	DS
Developer	Treasure
Publisher	D3
Available	August



Final Fantasy Tactics A2 Grimoire of the Rift

Is it Eevalice or Eyevalice?

words Heather Campbell

final Fantasy Tactics A2: Grimoire of the Rift may not be the most serious Square Enix game ever, but it shows off the seriousness with which they develop seemingly all of their titles. Like the child who keeps getting straight As, it's hard to keep finding things to be freshly pleased with in these Ivalice Alliance games. You just start assuming that the Square is going to do a good job. It's only when they misstep that you really give them some attention, and that's the unfortunate catch with consistent quality.

Tactics A2 is not a disappointment. It's a gorgeous portable, with a bazillion options and a charming (but shallow) story. Taking place after Final Fantasy XII, Tactics A2 is centered around the mischievous boy named Luso Clemens. When Luso finds a fantasy book with a blank page, he writes his name in it (wouldn't you?), and is sucked into Ivalice...and the middle of a battle with clan Gully. Luso's my type of guy—although he's interested in returning

to earth, he's far more enthusiastic about living the adventure before him. You know what? It's nice to see a gung-ho protagonist in a Square game. Often, they're too busy complaining about everything to realize they're riding on an awesome giant bird.

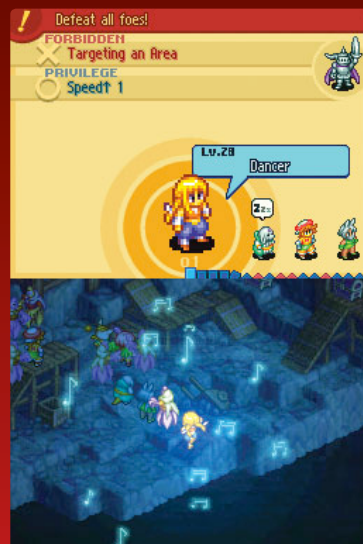
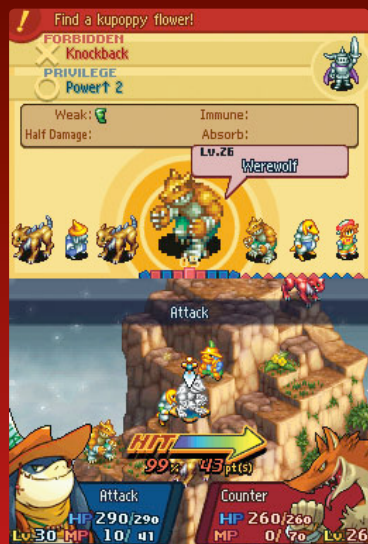
Alas, the story is secondary to the system, and in a tactics RPG, the system is everything. There are seven playable races in the game, and each type has race-specific strengths.

More than fifty jobs to choose from, and three hundred quests...there's a lot of game here. I put 100 hours into Final Fantasy Tactics Advance. I can only imagine that there's more to do here than in the GBA original. Simply put, there wasn't enough time in my life to max out every optional quest in the game. I think I could spend months in Ivalice and not knock out everything.

My favorite new feature is the road-map of upcoming actions during combat. See, the top screen tells you who is going to take the next action (kind of like Final



“Luso's my type of guy—although he's interested in returning to earth, he's far more enthusiastic about living the adventure before him.”



Don't fall off...

Fantasy X's battle system, if you stretch your mind), which allows for more tactical choices. Now you're not just making choices based on topography, but also based on time. Happily, the battles clip along quickly, whether you're making great calls or bad ones. Truth is, it's sort of hard to make bad calls in A2; the game came off a little easy.

Like Tactics Advance, the camera is fixed, which can sometimes clutter and confuse the battlefield. The trade-off is the artistic uniformity of the world, and it's worth it. The sprites are beautiful, and hell, so are the menus. So is the music. So is the character art. Another A from Square-Enix. Man, they should let us down once in a while...just so, you know, we could really be happy when they turned out another great game.

Final Fantasy Tactics A2 Grimoire of the Rift

review

System(s)	DS
Developer	Square Enix
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	Wireless Trading
ESRB Rating	E10+
Available	June 24, 2008

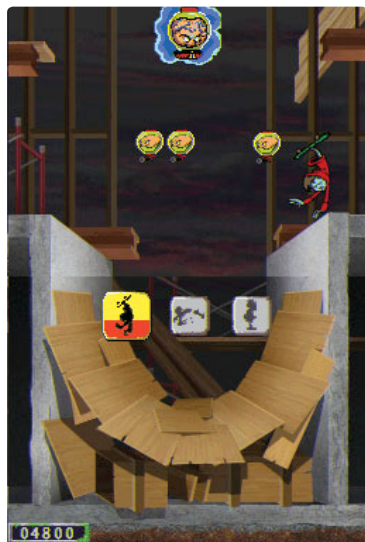


Teenage Zombies

System(s)	DS	Multi	NA
Developer	InLight Entertainment	Available	Out Now
Publisher	Inition Entertainment	ESRB Rating	E

Don't shed a tear for the Teenage Zombies. They may have met an untimely death, but thanks to the invasion of the Alien Brain Thingys, they're no longer six feet under. What respectable corpse could resist the allure of delectable, juicy pink brains flying about? Unbeknownst to them, the zombies are actually doing a public service: Regular humans have succumbed to mind control, so without Zack, Lori, and Finnigan, we'd be brain food. For your 2D pleasure, the game is designed for maximum action/strategy enjoyment, deploying the proper TZ in concert with the terrain. Skater boy Zack (or at least half of Zack) can slip into tight spaces and tosses a mean brain meat, Lori has mad vertical jumping skills, and Finnigan uses the tentacles that fused to his body as the sea eroded his grave to climb walls. Just add slick level design, lotsa gushy enemies (soldier brains, turret brains, gorgor brains, mutant sewer critters—that kinda stuff), and a rad comic (seriously, it rocks) and you've got an extremely cool DS game. I wouldn't mind seeing a juiced version of this one on PSN or XBLA. **Dave Halverson**

Zombie Hunter-Man:
Now that's a minigame!



Guitar Hero: On Tour

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	1-2
Developer	Vicarious Visions	Available	June 22
Publisher	RedOctane/Activision	ESRB Rating	E10+

Slapping a Guitar Hero peripheral on the DS makes you realize that anything could be Guitar Hero.

Throw those four buttons and the note highway together and you could play GH on the side of a can of soup.

Quite frankly, I'm waiting for someone to figure out how to make this work on an iPod. No joke. If you could Guitar Hero through your 160-gig song library, world economies would crash. Everyone would just sit on the train playing songs.

On Tour strips GH down to its essence: four buttons, strumming, songs. More than 25 tracks will be in the game, at a surprisingly high fidelity. The guitar input snaps into the GBA slot of your DS, and you strum the touch screen (with a guitar-pick stylus) as the notes rain down on the second screen. Plus, two players can go head-to-head in a distraction-trading versus mode like the one found in GH III. Though I'm not a fan of the Mario Kart-style obstacles (I wish the versus mode was simply based on merit), I have to admit that one distraction stood out: In the middle of a jam session, the screen was suddenly filled with a blank page. Before the song could continue, you had to dash out an autograph. That's rock 'n' roll, man. **Heather Campbell**

"On Tour strips GH down to its essence..."

GH, with no axe to grind.



Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood

preview

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	1-4
Developer	BioWare	Available	TBA
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	TBA

Sonic the Hedgehog, the role playing-game, developed by BioWare (makers of Mass Effect), for play on the Nintendo DS. There's a sentence I never expected to type in my life. Dialogue trees and turn-based attacks in a Sonic game. Okay, whatever you say.

Sonic is on vacation when he gets a call to adventure: Knuckles has been kidnapped! There are more than a few familiar faces (at least ten characters to play), and BioWare has stuffed plenty of winks into the game—like using rings as currency. The combat system was still in development, but team-based special attacks and touch-screen timing (think Lost Odyssey's collapsing rings) are an attempt to bring speed and camaraderie to the turn-based fighting. Awesome, but weird. Weird, weird, weird. **Heather Campbell**



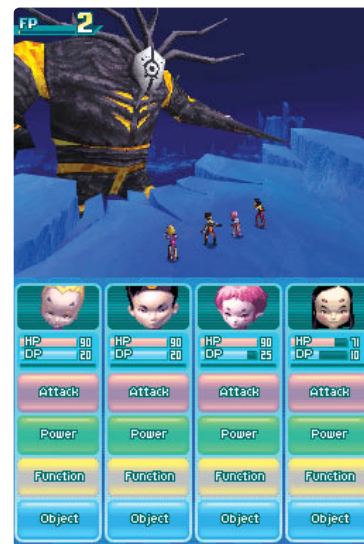
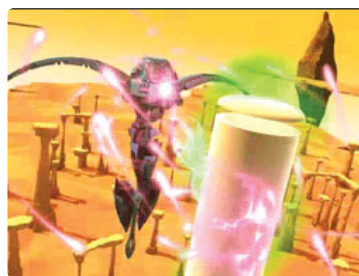
Code Lyoko: Fall of XANA

preview

System(s)	DS	Multi	1-2
Developer	The Game Factory	Available	June
Publisher	The Game Factory	ESRB Rating	Pending

Code Lyoko: Fall of XANA is the Matrix living in the soft mind of a child. Generic description, perhaps, but that's really what hits you early on—and the Final Fantasy spirit as well. The game is drawn around the French cartoon's fourth season, which means of course the target is squarely on the show's demographic. The stylus-driven battles are pretty basic and tooled for an action feel more than an RPG grind, but it's the distinct look of the game that seems most interesting... **Brady Fiechter**

Kids love to play with monsters.



Summon Night: Twin Age

review

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Flight-Plan	Available	June 3
Publisher	Atlus	ESRB Rating	Everyone 10+

I'm still a bit leery when it comes to the idea of action-based games being completely stylus controlled, but Flight-Plan has pulled it off surprisingly well in Summon Night: Twin Age. While there are a variety of issues that could be addressed should there be a second DS chapter, for the most part this is a game

that looks and plays great, conjuring memories of the classic days of Secret of Mana. I really wish the three active heroes could be human-controlled like in Mana though, because Twin Age is just begging to be traversable with a couple of friends. Plus, maybe then the cast (who aren't nearly as charming as those in the GBA Summon Nights) wouldn't be so damn chatty all the time. **Eric L. Patterson**



R-Type Command

review

System(s)	PSP	Multi	1-2
Developer	Irem	Available	May
Publisher	Atlus	ESRB Rating	E10+

What happened to one of my favorite shooters? Yes, it's time to accept that change can be good, and while a more traditional approach to the R-Type formula would have been the safe bet, the creators of this long-running series decided it was time to explore turn-based strategy. The game takes some warming up to—and a good deal of toil to master—but the new gameplay angle spins a few satisfying turns on the PSP. A hardened shooter buff might want to stay away, but even if you're yearning for oldschool R-Type, there's an exceptional tone and style to R-Type Command that stays plugged into the series' roots. **Heather Campbell**

“Yes, it's time to accept that change can be good...”



Mega Man Star Force 2

Preview

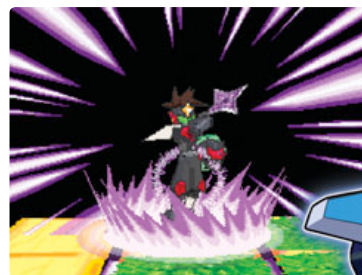
System(s)	DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Capcom	Available	June 24
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	Pending



"...updates have been sprinkled throughout..."

fans of the original Mega Man Star Force, good news: the game's sequel, unsurprisingly titled Mega Man Star Force 2. Star

Force 2 continues the story of heroes Geo Stelar and Omega-Xis, and while overall the game's look and feel are similar to the first, updates have been sprinkled throughout the adventure, such as an expanded selection of network options via Nintendo Wi-Fi Connect. You'll have your choice of two retail versions this time around, with each featuring a different pairing of the three new transformations: Zerber, Saurian, and Ninja. **Eric L. Patterson**



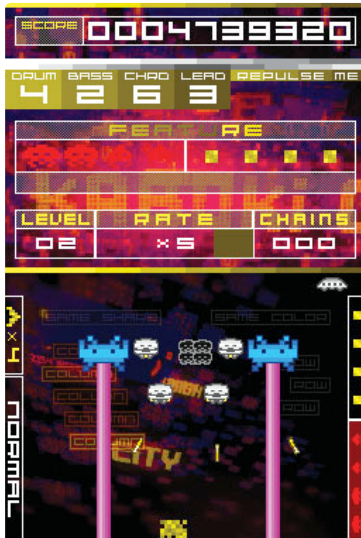
The mega force.

Space Invaders Extreme

review

System(s)	DS	Multi	1-2
Developer	Taito	Available	June 17
Publisher	Square Enix	ESRB Rating	E

In celebration of its 30th anniversary, Taito re-introduce their classic series to the world. While the heart and soul of Space Invaders is still very much present, the game is now fast-paced, high-tension, and music-infused, where surviving an onslaught of quick and varied enemy patterns replaces the slow, methodical invasion that was once the norm. Disagreement with some of the graphical choices that were made aside, Taito has built a top-notch game, one that both long-time series fans and first-time players alike will equally enjoy. **EP**



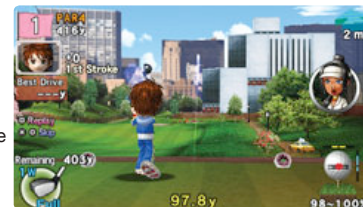
Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee 2

Preview

System(s)	PSP	Multi	1-16
Developer	Clap Hanz	Available	June
Publisher	Sony	ESRB Rating	E

If you've played Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee, you know the rules: cute characters, easy to pick up, stuff to unlock.

The infectious golf game for people who aren't nuts about golf, Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee 2 may be a step back after taking to the green on the PS3 version, but here the big draw is the robust online component. And it's hard to argue the appeal of the Hot Shots brand for the road. **Brady Fiechter**



Valkyria Chronicles

Skies of Valkyria

words Casey Lee

Things were looking grim for Sega a few years ago. Fan-favorite franchises like Panzer Dragoon and Jet Set Radio were abandoned, leaving the company to crank out 14 mediocre Sonic games a year and roughly as many preteen-targeted DS games with names like “Fashionable Witches: Love and Berry.” Just when we thought that everyone responsible for the great Sega games of yore had left the company or been transferred to cell-phone development, they bring us Senjo no Valkyria: Gallian Chronicles (to be called simply Valkyria Chronicles in the western world). Developed by veterans of the Sakura Wars and Skies of Arcadia teams, Valkyria perfectly captures the imaginative art design and disregard for genre conventions that characterized the company in happier times.

Unlike typical turn-based strategy games in which you can scroll around a map to see everything there is to see on the battlefield, your hand-drawn tactical map in Valkyria consists of only geographical features, bases, and a few known enemy positions. When you select a unit, the map smoothly morphs into a 3D environment that you can freely explore with your chosen soldier. Battles unfold in semi-real time; stationary units fire at approaching enemies automatically, but when you draw your gun and aim the action freezes so you can take

your time picking a target and deciding whether you want to go for a safe body shot or a potentially fatal headshot.

Since you begin each battle with a limited view of the battlefield, you'll have to ferret out enemy positions yourself. Scouting has rarely been such a significant factor in the turn-based strategy genre, and it adds a welcome layer of strategic depth here. Once your scout identifies a target and fires a few shots, you'll usually want to call in a stronger unit to finish it off; scouts have high movement rates and can throw grenades (which destroy cover), but are light on offense and defense. They typically blaze the trail for assault troops, who wield machine guns and are much more powerful, but far slower. There are also snipers, who snipe, anti-tank units armed with rocket launchers that can destroy tanks but are awkward to use in anti-personnel combat, and support units that suck at combat but can repair tanks, refill any ally's ammo, and build cover out of sandbags. The shining star of your team is the Edelweiss, a relic of a tank that still packs plenty of firepower. It can launch artillery shells, blast other tanks, mow down light infantry, plow through walls and obstacles, and provide cover for any allies walking beside it. The class selection in Valkyria may be limited compared to other SRPG's, but the units are well balanced, and every class gets a chance to shine.

You'll draft your 20-man army from



the units available at the capitol, a group that—to my delight—includes Vyse and Aika from Skies of Arcadia. Units all level-up by class and vary only slightly in stats, so the only real difference between them is their individual quirks—some have allergies to grass that will sap their health in outdoor maps, while others are lone wolves who get bonuses when fighting solo, or flirts who shoot straighter in the presence of a lady. Characters who die in battle are gone for good, but you can save any fallen unit from the cold embrace of “permadeath” by sending another unit to summon a medic to the body. This adds plenty of tension while freeing soft-hearted strategists from having to reach for the reset button when their

favorite characters are gunned down.

The game's mix of turn-based and real-time elements causes a few strange quirks, like surrounded characters being brought down in a fatal hail of bullets the instant you select them. But for the most part, the battlefield strategy in Valkyria Chronicles is exceptional. Moving your characters in real-time isn't merely a gimmick—it has deep, interesting, and thoroughly original strategic implications, and guiding a favorite unit through unexplored enemy territory offers a level of tension and excitement that is rare in this genre. The map designers keep the battles fresh by adding new gimmicks to every storyline battle, and the game only gets more interesting as the battles grow





in scale and new layers of complexity are added. My only complaint with the battles is the quantity: While many battles are quite lengthy, there are fewer than 20 in all.

I'm less satisfied with all the parts that take place between the battles. Valkyria Chronicles has a ton of story—as many as seven event scenes must be cleared between each battle, and while a few are well-directed action scenes that use the game's unique, manga-inspired texturing techniques to great effect, most consist merely of talking heads exchanging superfluous dialogue. Valkyria's world is

an interesting one, and the concept of civilians forming a combat brigade in a 1930's fantasy Europe is full of dramatic possibility, but the story focuses mainly on standard RPG tropes like the budding romance between the two dull main characters, and the mystery of the Valkyria, women with supernatural powers who intervened in a previous war but haven't been seen since. Valkyria Chronicles would have benefited from a little less talk, and a whole lot more rock.

The time you spend in the capitol upgrading weapons and training units adds

A taste of the visual style in this return to form of sorts for Sega



“Valkyria Chronicles is a perfect example of how fresh ideas can do more for a game than a \$30 million budget”



a bit of variety, but neither system offers any interesting decisions, since you'll almost certainly want to level up everything equally. Recruiting new units should be more fun than that it is, but interface issues make the process of selecting units a chore. (Free tip for Sega of America—redo the character-select screens so when you highlight a unit it shows you exactly what each potential does without making you individually select each one, *please*.)

Fortunately, these quibbles take almost nothing away from Valkyria Chronicles, since the developers absolutely nailed the battles that are the focus of the game. Valkyria Chronicles is a perfect example of

how fresh ideas can do more for a game than a \$30 million budget, and stands as indisputable proof that somewhere deep inside Sega's Tokyo compound, the heart of the Dreamcast era beats still.

Valkyria Chronicles

System(s)	PS3
Developer	Sega
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	None
Available	Now (Japan)

review

Siren

New Translation

Time to move to "Sirent" Hill?

words Casey Lee

While it's much too early to pass judgment on the new Silent Hill game, it's fair to say that recent developments have sent many of that series' fans looking elsewhere for their next-gen horror fix. PS3 owners may find what they're looking for in Japan's Hanuda village, the setting of Sony's confused and disturbing Siren series. In Siren: New Translation, a new generation of hardware has allowed SCE Japan to build a Hanuda that's grimmer and gloomier than ever before, but you'll rarely get a good look at it; like any good horror game, Siren generates much of its fear from the lighting, and the game's jittery flashlights, flickering lanterns, and harsh acetylene gas lamps offer just enough visual information to mislead, confuse, and—most of all—scare

the crap out of you.

Freaking out players is something Siren has always been good at, but in other areas...not so much. Intentionally awkward combat, a plodding, deliberate pace, and mixed-up nonlinear narratives may have kept players off balance, but they didn't win the series many fans. The developers have scrapped most of those aspects in New Translation, and promise to replace them with a speedier pace,



a more straightforward story (broken up into 12 consecutive stand-alone episodes, like a TV series), and easier, flashier combat. You can try out the new combat mechanics by downloading the demo from the Japanese PSN store, which allows players to experiment with environmental kills like smashing Japanese shibito (zombies) through windows or booting them down mine shafts. What you can't try out is the series' trademark sight-jacking system, which allows you to ferret out the locations of enemies by catching a glimpse of the world through their own eyes. The developers vow that despite the shift toward action and away from stealth, an "evolved" version of the sight-jacking system will remain a major part of the game.

The original Siren was released in the U.S. to weak sales, and its sequel was passed over for localization, which looked likely to spell an early death for the series. But the developers of Siren: New Translation seem determined to score an international hit, and have taken the unusual step of replacing the Japanese cast of the earlier installment with a bunch of visiting Americans. In a



Blair Witch-esque twist, New Translation stars a mostly foreign film crew, who find themselves lost in the mountains outside Hanuda village when a documentary shoot goes horrible awry. Even the Japanese version will be voiced in English, so New Translation seems like a shoo-in for an American release—but if you don't want to take any chances, you can pick up the import on July 24.

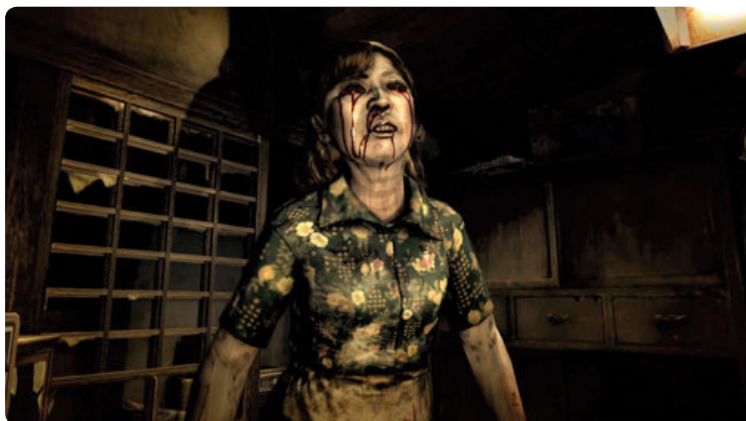
Siren: New Translation

System(s)	PS3
Developer	SCE Japan
Publisher	Sony
Available	July 24

preview

"The developers of Siren: New Translation seem determined to score an international hit."

Siren hopes to capitalize on the trendy Asian horror first popularized by The Ring



Developer File 01: Inside CyberConnect2

words Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

Welcome to play's first Developer File, a semiregular feature that will spotlight Japanese video game creators with interviews and glimpses inside their rarely-seen development environments. For our inaugural installment, we chose CyberConnect2, a company that can certainly be said to march to a different drummer. In the infamously staid world of Japanese video game development, CC2 stands alone in their creation of a fun and easygoing company culture. This is due much to president and founder Hiroshi Matsuyama's breezy, easygoing attitude and belief that happy staff simply make better games. He's even a man known to take all his key staff on vacation for intensive brainstorming sessions, and this admirable ethos is more than apparent in

The Carny Place Hakata building in Fukuoka: Home of CyberConnect2

all of CC2's works: From the cult hit PSone action game Tail Concerto in 1998, through the .hack and Naruto: Ultimate Ninja series, and on to their upcoming Naruto PS3 project, CC2's games feel thoroughly different from the majority of Japanese licensed pabulum. They are lauded on both sides of the pond, but now the company is expanding into new realms: Last December saw CC2's movie and sound teams spun off into separate brands ("SAI" and "LieN", respectively), and this Spring saw the release of their first CG anime. play followed Hiroshi Matsuyama for a few days on the eve of the release of .hack//GU Trilogy, a gorgeous and as-yet Japan-only CG movie produced entirely in-house at CC2. We sat down with the infectiously mirthful and outspoken Matsuyama at three locations to talk about it—his company's home offices in Fukuoka, the venue for GU Trilogy's theatrical premiere, and ECC Computer College in Osaka, where Matsuyama delivered a rousing lecture to game industry hopefuls.

Interview Hiroshi Matsuyama, President and Founder, CyberConnect2

Part 1: Matsuyama on .hack//GU Trilogy



play: Congratulations on the release of .hack//GU Trilogy. How does it feel to have created a game franchise so popular we're sitting here at the premiere of its first theatrical anime adaptation?

Hiroshi Matsuyama: Well, let's see...the series was first released in Japan in 2002. We've had games, anime, comics...all kinds of media. Development began in 2000, so we've been living with it for eight years now. At the core are the original four volumes of .hack as a "first season", and GU as the "second season". Surrounding that core are the things like manga and anime...we'd done a radio program, we'd done novels, and we felt that the only thing left was a movie (laughs). For the final installment of the GU project we were actually able to make that happen...I can't even put into words how I feel about it! We finally, finally

cracked that last form of media.

GU Trilogy is getting famous for being made entirely by a remarkably small number of staff. When did the project start, and how long did it take to complete?

It began in 2006, after Volumes 1 of GU was already out in Japan. Vol. 1 came out in May, 2 in September, and 3 in January... so it was right between Vols. 1 and 2. The beginning of it all was the fact that we'd heard from so many of our fans, saying that they wanted to see .hack cutscenes as a standalone product.

Did you get requests to, say, release a DVD with all the GU cutscenes?

Exactly! So many people had asked us to release a DVD with all of our cutscenes, even if it was only the prerendered ones. My reaction to that was, "Wait a minute... just play the game!" (laughs) Unfortunately, there are a lot of people that don't have that kind of time. Playing all of GU will take a hundred hours, and I knew most adults just can't spare that much time. But then I realized, a lot of kids probably can't either.

Speaking statistically, in Japan, if you asked a kid in Japan what their favorite game genre was, the answer was always "RPGs!", but...

But not any more?

If you ask them now, they're more likely to say "Action!". When you ask why, it's simply because "action games don't take a lot of time". We're in an age when even children are too busy to play games, so there's a movement right now to make games that can be picked up and put down easily. I thought it was really unfortunate that we had people intrigued by this RPG we made, but they couldn't find time to finish it. Why not compress the story into one anime? What if we could get more people interested in the world of .hack that way? That was the genesis of it. Even though we were still making the games, I gathered some key staff together and asked "do you think we can do an anime?". A year and a half later, it was done.

It's amazing you were able to do it so quickly, and with games to make besides.

"So many people had asked us to release a DVD with all of our cutscenes. My reaction to that was, 'Wait a minute...just play the game!'"

It really was! It was difficult, incredibly difficult! (laughs) Everyone was concentrating so hard on making the games. But I was able to gradually pull people off the project, by telling them "You know, we're doing something kind of interesting over here..." The first person I asked about it was our screenwriter, Mr. Shinzato. And his immediate reaction was, "impossible!". (laughs) I really had to convince him... "Come on, just listen! Listen to what I have to say! We can make it work if we do this and this..."

It sounds like you had a lot of convincing to do.

I sure did. When we finished the plan and brought it to Namco Bandai, who was releasing the games, we met with a producer from Bandai Visual, Koji Morimoto. This was right around the time of the 2006 Tokyo Game Show. He became the president of Bandai's home video division the next Spring, but we were able

to catch him before and put our anime into production.

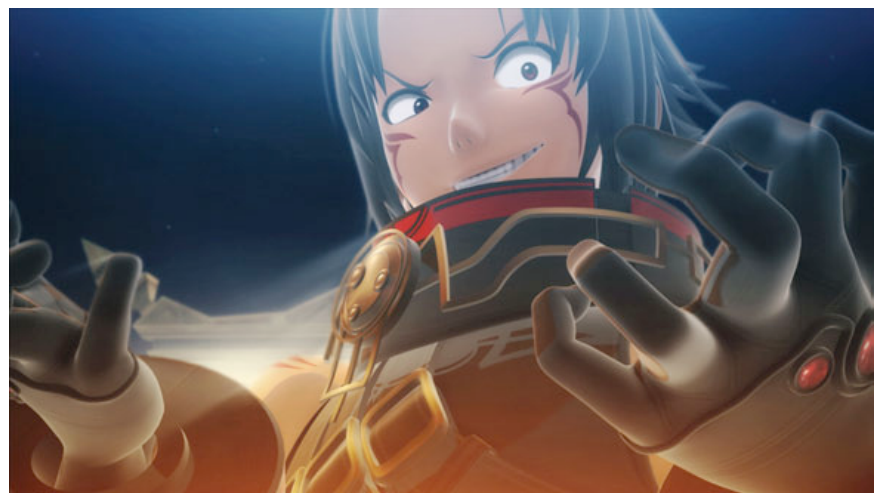
I was curious about the way GU Trilogy was announced, as "the first CG anime from CyberConnect2". What does that mean? Will you do more?

Originally we were never thinking about anything other than GU Trilogy. Everything started from the desire to make .hack into a movie, but...there's more to it now (laughs).

I suppose that's all you'll say about that. Tell us about the production, instead.

What difficulties did a game developer face making a full-length anime?

The single most difficult thing was the differences between game and anime culture. Our in-game cutscenes might be prerendered CG, but you have to play a game, right? For example...you might be fighting a boss, and we'll make a really exciting CG cutscene to follow that as a reward. Their purpose is to increase



"Even though we were still making [our] games, I gathered some key staff together and asked 'do you think we can do an anime?'"

the timing...then we'd do the final HD output. Then there would always be little artifacts and CG bugs you didn't notice in low resolution. Finally, we had to check each shot on a 52" monitor to catch all the little problems at the resolution. Towards the end, it was just like debugging a game! (laughs)

You mean like seams between polygons and rendering bugs?

Exactly. Things kind of run together in standard definition and get hidden, but you can see everything clearly in HD. That was really tough and always kept us on our toes while we were making this. CG's been around for a long time, and a lot of people make CG anime now, but for us it was like a reconfirmation of what was possible with the technology. When we came up with the techniques we call "Super Facial" and "Over Perspective", I really grasped the fact that CG has no limits...there's an unlimited possibility there, and I know we're going to develop even more impressive techniques from now on.

We just saw those at the presentation (ed. note—see "Super Facial" and "Over Perspective" images), and I was very impressed. You'd have no idea the shots were composited that way. I guess it's kind of like forced perspective in manga and anime.

We actually had the idea for those techniques when we were working with Mr. Yoshiyuki Sadamoto from Gainax...

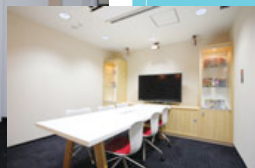
When you talked about the fighter plane wings (laughs?) (ed. note—from our original .hack//GU interview with Mr. Matsuyama. Mr. Sadamoto explained to Mr. Matsuyama that an animator might draw a fighter plane's wing as visible, though in three-dimensional reality it would be hidden by perspective, for the simple reason that it looked cooler that way)

That's right. When we were first working together making a 3-D game, he told me, "CG is too serious; it can't lie". That was painful for us to hear, but we simply



CyberConnect2

CyberConnect2's immaculate, 2001-esque reception rooms



The main development area. Endless cubicles continue as far behind this vantage point as they do in front, staff diligently working on PS3, Wii and DS projects



Something we found particularly impressive: Rows and rows of manga are available for employee inspiration, both modern and classic



The home of CC2's sound and music team, amply furnished with live instruments and a beefy 7.1 system



The debugging section is staffed with interns and students hoping for their big break in the game industry



Osaka Event

It was standing room only for the .hack//GU Trilogy event in Osaka



The main development area. Endless cubicles continue as far behind this vantage point as they do in front, staff diligently working on PS3, Wii and DS projects

thought, "then why not break through that?". Mr. Sadamoto was really the origin of these techniques. His single comment made us completely rethink our CG. We've made hands giant, eyes tiny, broken jaws... and it all has to be done manually (laughs).

What difficulties did you face compressing a hundred hour long story into a single movie? GU Trilogy feels

incredibly dense, even though it focuses almost exclusively on Haseo, Atoli and Ovan.

We rewrote the script so many times. When thinking about the fans, you want to include as many characters as possible. In fact, our original outline had Alkaïd appearing as second female lead, like the GU games. She's one of the most popular characters, and I'm fond of her myself, so I absolutely

Developer File 01: Inside CyberConnect2

wanted to have her in it, but...it just didn't come together. The axis was broken. Finally we decided that if we were to make the statement we wanted to with this movie, we had to shore up our second act and cut her. Other characters were the same. With that decision, we were able to do a story that brought an end to Haseo's character arc.

As a single work, GU Trilogy actually introduces a lot of discrepancies into the established storyline. Where does it stand in the .hack canon for you?

I consider GU Trilogy to be a single movie. It's a single work...you can think of it as something separate from .hack//GU, the games. All the other iterations of GU—games and anime and comics—they're all connected, but GU Trilogy stands alone. That's why events are told differently, and it has a different denouement.

When I first heard about the GU Trilogy movie project, I was sure it was going to be a collection of game cutscenes with some new linked scenes added, kind of like what you mentioned before.

I think everyone did.

Even scenes that are taken directly from the games, like Haseo's PKK scene from

the very beginning, are presented totally different from the way they were in the RPGs. Did you feel a pressure to make everything different from the games?

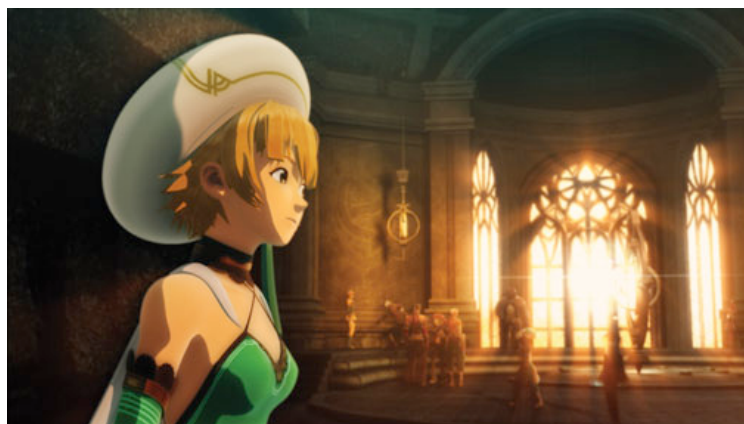
It's just how our staff feels about it. They hate doing something they've already done before, they hate expressing things they've already expressed. The scene might be the same, but the manner in which it's presented will change...they insist on that.

Speaking of things that have changed, tell me about Haseo's "B-st Form", the new form introduced in GU Trilogy.

Well, writing the script, we knew we wanted a new form for him. In the original scenario, Haseo would go from 1st to 2nd form, become 3rd, and go see Ovan, right? In the script for Trilogy, however, he has to go through a mental transformation to reach his next stage. His emotions are too much for him, so he goes through an "incorrect" form of evolution. The 3rd Form from the games didn't have enough impact, so we went with an all-new design.

The B-st Form is an "incorrect" 3rd Form, then?

You could say so. It's like the "Dark Side" of his 3rd Form. When we were all staying together at the hotel during our

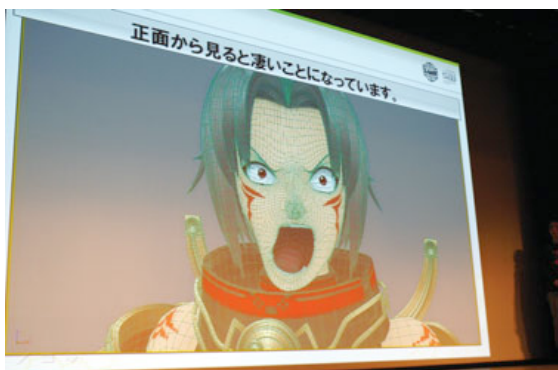




CC2's visual team SAI, responsible for every second of footage of GU Trilogy, is introduced



Displaying classic Matsuyama flair, footage from story brainstorming sessions was shown. Fans were particularly amused by Matsuyama demonstrating exactly how he wanted hero Haseo to hold heroine Atoli



3D anime magic: SAI displays techniques they call "Super Facial" and "Over Perspective", completely breaking special rules to achieve a final result akin to hand-drawn animation

"When we were first working together making a 3-D game, [Yoshiyuki Sadamoto] told me, 'CG is too serious; it can't lie.'"

brainstorming, I actually sketched out Haseo's B-st Form face for our staff, just to show them how much they were allowed to change Haseo's look. His hair is unkempt, his eyes totally white...I insisted he not have pupils and his appearance appear totally demonic. One of our designers, Mr. Hosokawa, is very good with that sort of look, and he nailed the design in one take.

I understand there was no motion capture used in GU Trilogy at all. The animation for Haseo's B-st Form was especially impressive...what did you use for reference?

Nothing, really. It all came out of our animators' heads. The team members first

prepare storyboards for the action, and I review them. I tell them, "no, not like that, like this!", and we re-do the action over and over. We're making a movie, so visual flow is very important. There's a funny story there...you know how Haseo uses his swords as B-st form? I was told that it looked a lot like the flurry of keyblades in the secret "Birth by Sleep" movie at the end of Kingdom Hearts II Final Mix. I took a look at it afterwards to check, and it really was similar. But I assure you it was a total coincidence! (laughs) We really had no idea.

I'd like to ask about SAI, the internal cutscene unit that made GU Trilogy. They've even been spun off into a brand



What Is .hack//GU Trilogy?

.hack//GU Trilogy is the first CG animated theatrical film by CyberConnect2, and only the second to be produced by a Japanese video game studio. Released in Japan last month on Blu-ray and DVD, GU Trilogy compresses and retells the story of .hack//GU, originally separated into three volumes for PlayStation 2. As 93 minutes of pure CG anime magic superior to almost anything that has come before it, one would never imagine it had come from a mid-sized game studio. Namco Bandai is reportedly slated to release the film in North America.

of their own now. How many people does it compose?

I apologize. I'm afraid we're not revealing exactly how many people made GU Trilogy, but it isn't very many. SAI is composed of top staff that worked on both our Naruto and .hack games...people responsible for CG cinematics and the flashy realtime special moves in Naruto. We selected from among our staff those that most excelled at pure visuals.

Will SAI work exclusively on CG anime from now on, or will they continue to contribute to games?

The answer to that would be both. Compared to our other internal production teams, SAI is all about their visual technical skills, and they share that knowledge with the entire company. However, now that they've made a high definition anime movie, I don't think they'll just be doing cutscenes for games. I think SAI will continue to make single works as a group of visual specialists.

I see. You dodged the question before, but does SAI have an idea of what they'll be doing next?

They definitely do. Of course, I can't tell you what it is yet, but...I can say that it probably won't be what people are expecting after having seen GU Trilogy. We always want to be doing new things, so it will probably be an entirely new visual work.

In addition to SAI, CC2 has spun off its

music unit, led by Tomoyo Mitani, into a brand of its own named "LieN". I was astonished to find out that almost all of the music in .hack//GU, both games and anime, were composed by one person. You really can't compare her to a normal musician. Mrs. Mitani's speed is just abnormal. Honestly, she has to be three times as fast as the average composer. She does every single game we make. She's even getting faster year by year! She's married with two children, she can't work overtime because she has to pick her kids up, and there's no way she can work weekends. Really, she can only work when she's in the office, but she uses her time away for inspiration. When she comes into the office, she's completely ready to output her hundreds of songs. I rarely even need her to redo anything.

Will the new unit LieN be working on music for projects other than upcoming games and possible CG anime?

Yes, they sure will! (laughs)

I guess you can't say any more (laughs). Returning to GU Trilogy, are there any other classic Matsuyama anecdotes you'd like to recall from production? Classic Matsuyama anecdotes, huh? Well...when we were all staying at the hotel to brainstorm the script, that was a lot of fun. One thing I thought was very CyberConnect2-esque...our staff don't follow the storyboards! (laughs)

They go off and do their own thing?

Please, I'm begging them! Why do they think we have storyboards? Why do they think I signed off on those exact storyboards? Why is the final product so different?! (laughs) There's a reason for every change I made! This influences that, and so on...why did I spend all those days reviewing the storyboards, anyway? It's like...how should I say this...damn you, CyberConnect2! (laughs)

You're losing your presidential demeanor. Changing gears, what are the plans for American release of GU Trilogy?

Honestly, I still don't know exactly what will happen, but I think Namco Bandai will definitely release it in English. I'd ask the fans to please wait patiently for it.

So far, CC2 and Square Enix are the only game companies to release CG anime movies, but I know you've publicly expressed your desire to see more Japanese game developers become involved in the field. What kind of CG anime would you like to see game developers make?

Hmmm. Speaking geographically (ed. note—both CC2 and Level-5 are located in Kyushu, Japan), I know there's going to

"I don't think anyone's seen a CG anime quite like this...it doesn't resemble anything else."

be a live-action Professor Layton movie. I'd prefer to see an animated one. But Layton is a game, right? If you take out the mystery/puzzle solving aspect, it would cease to be Professor Layton. I imagine a half-hour TV anime, where puzzles are posed in the first half before commercial, and answered in the second...

I'd like to see that myself (laugh). Do you have a final message for American fans awaiting the final iteration of .hack//GU, GU Trilogy?

I'll be saying this to fans who haven't yet seen the movie, of course, but...I think we faced and overcame a lot of challenges making GU Trilogy. I don't think anyone's seen a CG anime quite like this, and it doesn't resemble anything else. For people who are getting tired of the average anime or film, please take a look at GU Trilogy when it's released. I think you'll find something very new.

Developer File 01: Inside CyberConnect2

Interview Part 2

Matsuyama On CyberConnect2 and the Future of Japanese Games

Thanks for taking time to speak with us again after your lecture. Do you think it went well?

Yeah, I think I got a good reaction! I hear all this talk about "today's youth", but the students who came to Osaka ECC College today are clearly serious about the video games they love so much. It's really nice to see all these smiling faces (laughs).

I'm sure it is. CyberConnect2 is one of the Japanese developers most gregarious about raising and recruiting new talent, with your lectures and internship program...

We are. We definitely are.

Why do you put so much emphasis on "raising" new talent? I've heard you say before you'd like to make Fukuoka a Hollywood for video games.

I have said that, and still believe it, but more than anything else I'm interested in making new things. My colleagues and I are all in our 30s now. We may have created the last ten years of video games, but the next ten years will be created by people now in their teens and 20s. I think that people like Hideo Kojima and Shigeru

Miyamoto shaped the ten years before that, but...ten, twenty years from now, it just won't be right if we're still the most successful at making games. I was in sixth grade when I first played a Famicom game, but it wasn't until the PlayStation came out...I must have been 26, an adult, before I really understood what the game industry was. Yet young people today have had game consoles around since the day they were born. There are plenty of young people whose first game was Final Fantasy VII. For us, that's like yesterday, right?

It often seems that way.

For those kids whose first game was FFVII, the first game they felt an emotional attachment to...this is clearly a new generation. They've had cell phones and

"My colleagues and I are all in our 30s now. We may have created the last ten years of video games, but the next ten years will be created by people now in their teens and 20s."



President Matsuyama regales game industry hopefuls with rose tales of his company



"Games that hit big overseas aren't just fun... they have a strong and serious basis of high technology behind them."

Aspirants listen raptly to Matsuyama's future vision for the Japanese game industry



access to the internet for as long as they can remember. If you and I had had those things in our youth, I think our viewpoints would be totally different. Those reasons alone almost make kids today Newtypes (ed. note—a Gundam reference to the new, evolved race of man). I believe that if we don't try to raise that kind of young person to be game creators, nothing truly new will ever be made.

That's why you place such a serious emphasis on doing what you can to influence the game creators of tomorrow.

Yes, I definitely want to continue doing as much as I can. Of course, I'm lucky enough to have a day job making my own games, and I have to attend to that, but I will do as much as I can. I try to speak with promising students like this in Kyushu, Osaka and Tokyo at least.

The game industry will thank you for it. I'd like to use this time to ask a few

general questions that we didn't get around to in Fukuoka. This is a difficult question, but how do you think the Japanese game industry at large is handling the transition to next-gen? CC2 is one of the most technology-forward Japanese developers...

In terms of scale, it's no longer a simple case of "if the game is fun, that's enough". I think Western games today make this clear. The way in which "fun" is presented to the user is becoming very exhausting work. On one hand, Nintendo has changed their target market and introduced fresh types of gameplay. I think that's one way to go about it, but games that hit big overseas, games that sell, aren't just fun—they have a strong and serious basis of high technology behind them. The rate of advance in game technology is incredibly fast now, and, unfortunately...Western technology surpassed Japanese a long time ago. So with our own PS3 project, we're trying to achieve a flavor, a taste, that's purely Japanese. Japan has always



been a nation of craftsmen, hasn't it? I think that craftsmanship can absolutely be expressed in game culture. That's the domain we want to fight in. I believe the possibilities inherent in video games are limitless.

You've just answered a lot of my questions before I asked them. I love hearing such a positive outlook. I was going to ask for your thoughts on the common fear that Japan might become a technological backwater dominated by what some call Nintendo's "non-games"...

Well, like I say, Nintendo's policies are definitely one way of going about things. It's like they've stood down from the plateau of high technology to change the way they flavor their cuisine, right? I'm not exactly sure if that will please long-time game fans, but by bringing in a totally new market they've expanded the possibilities video games hold. Yet from a passionate game fan's perspective, looking back at the core essence of games is important too, isn't it? When I think about how software is being released that makes us question whether or not they're even "games"...Nintendo has a perspective that's purely Japanese. I really think only a Japanese company could have done what they did.

They certainly have served to carve out a totally new market segment. I guess it's not really about platform wars anymore, but rather a matter of completely different territories.

You could say that. That's why the game industry is so fascinating, isn't it? (laughs)

Getting back to your PS3 project for a moment...may I ask if you've played

Ubisoft's Xbox 360 Naruto game? Rise of a Ninja? Yes, I have.

What are your thoughts, being another studio making a next-gen Naruto game?

In terms of both technology and game structure, I thought, "Wow, look how far America has come!". I suppose it's Montreal, actually, Canada...but I was genuinely very impressed by the look of it. When I played it, however, there were aspects that made me think, "oh, I knew it". This is probably only because I'm Japanese, but that type of licensed game...I don't mean for this to sound too harsh, but there was a roughness to it. As a video game on a game console, I'm sure it was fun for a lot of people, but I don't think it would satisfy someone who really loves Naruto, the hard-core Naruto fan.

Thank you. Finally, if I could ask you to bring a little bit of that Matsuyama passion you just showed these Osakan students to your American fans...

When we Japanese creators look at Western games, it all seems like war. This may be a generalization, but FPS or TPS, whether your opponents are people or aliens or monsters, Western games are always about destroying things and causing damage. Of course the question of likes and age range enters into this, but I think the potential for more pleasant, more engrossing games is there. Take Hollywood movies, for example. Sure, you have your big action blockbusters like Die Hard, but just as many people around the world enjoy Disney animated films. Here in Japan we're going to continue to create our essentially Japanese fantasy worlds, win acclaim from Western critics and fans, and make games that will let you feel affinity with us...games you can get behind! So...just wait for them!



play magazine presents

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American McGee's GRIMM

American McGee presents American McGee's coloring program

words Greg Orlando



It's a scary world out there...

“The original fairy tales, as compiled by the Brothers Grimm, were not fairy tales at all.”

of the famous brothers' canon. Among the announced episodes for Grimm are Little Red Riding Hood, Pinocchio, Jack and the Beanstalk, Cinderella, and Godfather Death. The goal, of course, is to make these adventures fun and accessible: Gameplay isn't terribly complicated because McGee wants Grimm to be enjoyed by a mass audience.

Although there are some genuinely exciting and challenging moments in Grimm—it's hard not to be intrigued by the thought of the dwarfish Grimm being chased by the giant from Jack and the Beanstalk—a lot of the

game involves a simple transforming mechanic. As in, run, Grimm, run.

you, dear friends, have been lied to. The fairy tales you grew up with have been sweetened and sanitized.

The original fairy tales, as compiled by the Brothers Grimm, were not fairy tales at all. They were cautionary tales designed to educate children and instill in them a fear of strangers, foolishness, vanity, excessive curiosity, greed, wolves, etc. ad nauseam. And by god, they worked wonders in their original, less optimistic state.

They were, in fact, Grimm.

Now, game designer American McGee, known mainly for putting his first name in front of all his titles, has taken these tales and returned them to their former dark glory. American McGee's Grimm, a third-person perspective adventure, presents 24 separate chapters, each of which is a self-contained fairy tale adventure. As the mischievous imp Grimm, it's your job to take a beloved tale and turn its happily-ever-after into oh-dear-god-it-burns.

“One core concept of Grimm is that present-day versions of fairy tales have been made too light,” McGee says.

“The teeth have been removed from them, effectively rendering their morals and messages mute. Until the threat is reinstated, what's the point? And that's Grimm's mission in a nutshell: return overly sweet tales to their original forms, full of harm, hurt, and revenge.”

McGee notes each fairy tale should take roughly 30 minutes to play through. The idea here is that Grimm—who himself is a fairy tale character whose exact origin must remain, for the sake of this preview, unrevealed—is initially presented with the sanitized version of a story. He must then darken things up by running around and transforming the environments into something more suitable, and it's here that Grimm finds its sense of whimsy. Happy pink-and-green fish become skeletons. Merry pirates become hook pirates, a collection of (of course) hooks and wooden pegs. Windmills become death-mills, their sails sharpened blades. Once an environment's been suitably altered, Grimm can then recount the way things really happened.

Players will get to run through a host of Grimm's fairy tales, as well as a few

American McGee's Grimm

System(s)	PC
Developer	Spicy Horse Games
Publisher	GameTap
Online/Multi	NA
Available	July

preview



Age of Conan

This barbarian may possess leadership qualities

words Mike Griffin

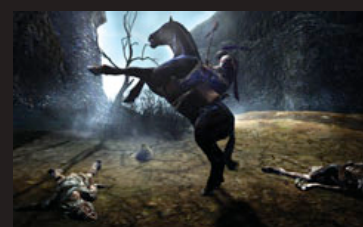
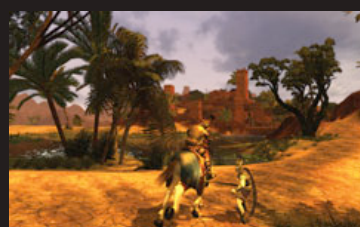
I was asked by an anxious clerk at GameStop if he should cancel his WoW subscription and play Age of Conan instead, and it was quite remarkable how a chorus of fellow MMO players gathered around, echoing the question. Most were Warcraft faithful, but a few LOTR Online, Lineage, and EverQuest players joined in. I could see the glimmer of addiction in many of those eyeballs, desperation in others. Give me a reason to quit this game, they silently pleaded. Tell me if Conan can fill the gap and crush the withdrawal symptoms. Well, good sirs and madam, you'll be happy to know that Age of Conan is absolutely comprehensive as far as premium, subscription-based, massively multiplayer titles go. Name a top feature from your current fantasy MMO and you'll find it in Funcom's Age of Conan, often realized on a larger, darker scale.

Indeed, much depends on your opinion of Conan's brand of grim and gritty fantasy, where proportion and decoration lean toward pre-medieval-era realism: The tales are often bleak and savage, the humor wry and dry, the dark gods endlessly vengeful. Did you enjoy the narrative and dialogue in last year's hit RPG *The Witcher*? Age of Conan has a similar mood and execution, with cut-scenes and dialogue choices that go beyond Accept or Exit, guided by the pedigree of Funcom's talented Dreamfall writers and the completeness of Robert E.

Howard's world. It all amounts to a highly readable MMO and the best newbie phase I've experienced since Vanguard's Kojan starting area. Lightweight MMO players may actually look at their first 20 to 30 hours in AoC and think, "Wow—the game already paid for itself, even if I don't play past the first free month."

Age of Conan is a big, bloated MMO. To get it looking like it does in these screens, you're going to need a powerful rig. There's a vast range of scalability in the game's options, allowing you to go from high-end Xbox-like visuals to high-end DX 10 graphics, and anyone can claim a brisk frame rate if they're willing to tweak those sliders. It seems obvious, but settings like full shadows, specular terrain, and parallax mapping make a huge difference. You'll need the sort of horsepower that Crysis requires if you intend to run Conan smoothly at its highest possible settings, and Funcom has piled on the shader candy for those who can do it. Luckily everyone can enjoy the fine world sound design (a big 7.1 mix) and Basil-inspired Conan tunes.

So, presuming you're smitten by the style and early themes, and you're happy with how it's running for you (by the way, don't even try it if you have less than 2 GB of RAM), is Conan worth joining for the long haul? I'm going for it. AoC has 80 big character levels to climb, fortress PvP, tons of skills, crazy mounts, a tight collection of playable classes with



archetypes that work—spectacularly in the case of pet classes, and a mature-rated world I actually want to explore. However, it's really not breaking new ground in the genre. People that don't do the MMO thing might cave in to the big narrative and actiony combat, but I think they'll see the similarity that Conan bears to the EQ/WoW gene pool, and that might not fly. For others, AoC will be an impressive refurbishing of a template they find irresistible.

Age of Conan

System(s)	PC
Developer	Funcom
Publisher	Eidos
Online/Multi	Persistent online
Available	May

preview

"...guided by the pedigree of Funcom's talented Dreamfall writers and the completeness of Robert E. Howard's world."



indie circuit



Cortex Command

Brain slayers in outer space

words Mike Griffin

In the far-flung future of Cortex Command, space-traveling humans have traded in frail bodies for android creations, using their intact organic minds to remotely guide cybernetic dummies on a galaxy-wide treasure hunt. It's like a host of disembodied brains moonlighting as profit-seeking miners, gallivanting across the cosmos with a legion of disposable

tin men. And everybody's doing it. This is CC's tale of side-scrolling strategy, a game of base management and tactical squad control, as you issue orders and air-drop supplies from the comfort of your brain pod's bunker while leading robots to gold deposits and victory. We spoke to the development director of Data Realms, Dan "Data" Tabar, about Cortex Command's thoughtful wiring.

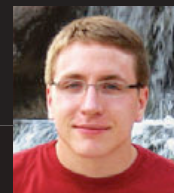


Cortex	
System(s)	PC
Developer	Data Realms
Publisher	Data Realms
Online/Multi	1-4p Co-op/Vs.
Available	TBA

preview

INTERVIEW

with Dan "Data" Tabar, Development Director, Data Realms



play: Cortex Command is built on some cool technology. Still images don't do the animations justice; vibrant 2-D pixel art, sweet particles, huge physics. Are you tapping in to a bunch of open source libraries here, or is this all homegrown?

The engine is entirely built by me on top of several portable open source libraries, over the course of about seven years now. The only exception is the GUI interface library, which was built for us by a guy named Jason Boettcher. The vibrant graphics are thanks to the talent of Arne Niklas Jansson, who churns out incredible designs, concept art, and the in-game pixel art.

It's a great style. Really compliments the animation. You guys don't actually work together on Cortex Command in the same physical space though, right? Yeah, Niklas and I have never met in real life, but we've worked together for over four years now, talking online almost every day. The current game design is a result of the crazy input from both of us.

You can do anything through remote networking these days, kind of like brains controlling robots in space. So you're the programming whiz. You must realize this is a perfect console game; the gamepad controls, all that local multiplayer. How about DS or PSP? Let's say a publisher calls you up and says, "Hey Data, we want to put your game on Xbox Live and PSN this fall!" Could you

bring it over?

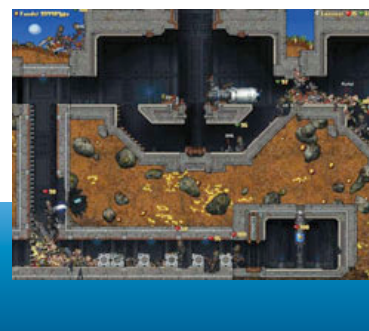
The code could definitely be ported to most platforms, as long as the memory and CPU resources are there to run our detailed physics simulation. So the DS is probably not viable for that reason. Mac OS X right now is highest on our list of new target platforms.

Cortex Command picks up at this Earth-like planet that TradeStar, the trade federation, is orbiting, along with dozens of interested parties. What's the planet called, and who are these different factions in the federation?

We actually had a competition on the fan forums years ago to name the planet and its moon. We got hundreds of entries, but just haven't decided on any yet. The factions are also under development, but we're making several very distinct ones that will have entire sets of weapons, bodies, and ships characteristics to their visual and overall styles.

Sounds like a planetary campaign with many unique foes. Can you tell us about the proposed story mode for CC? Are you using the game's editor to create missions and scenarios, elaborate puzzles, narrative breaks, you know...a proper handcrafted campaign?

We're working on an elaborate campaign story mode which will be a turn-based metagame on top of the individual missions, tying them together into a narrative which isn't completely linear. A big influence for us is the old X-COM: UFO





Defense games, which had the strategic “A big influence for us is the old X-COM: UFO Defense games, which had the strategic base management game over the entire planet and the tactical missions on a squad level.”

Dan “Data” Tabor

base management game over the entire planet and the tactical missions on a squad level.

Are you going to have regions of the planet that players can own outright and charge other prospectors to use?

We’re not going for quite that much complexity, but the idea is the same. You’ll have to establish mining bases to gain income each turn, and you’ll have to gamble a certain amount of money for each mission you try. The amount you choose is how much you’ll have available on the ground. If you fail the mission, that money is lost and you can try again until your total funds are out, and then it’s game over. Each turn you’ll get to choose between a few different options of where on the planet you want to go next.

Will players get to run the campaign together in co-op mode?

Our split screen will work in the campaign, so you can run any mission with up to three of your friends. It’s like your mining company is sending down several brain employees at once to handle a complex situation. Since it makes the mission easier to finish, it might cost you more gold per extra brain you send down.

How about secrets, achievements, or hard-to-find items hidden on the planet?

There will definitely be artifacts and items that unlock new tools, weapons, bodies,

and ships for you in the campaign. For example, if you don’t find certain artifacts early on, other future missions might be a lot harder to finish—yet not impossible. Some story missions will be entirely based on having to retrieve a certain item from a deep and heavily defended bunker complex: Fight, sneak, or dig your way down to grab the item, carry it back to the surface, toss it into a rocket, and fly it off the top of the screen.

You guys must have some interesting concepts for different weapons, gadgets, and cybernetic bodies. Terraforming trinkets, different types of damage...things that would compliment Cortex Command's existing bag of fun. Oh boy...we already have sprites made for several dozen new weapons, from different eras like World War II, contemporary—including today, future, et cetera. There’s concepts drawn for several of the factions and their lineups, like in some of the images we’re giving you. There will be much larger bodies, as well as smaller ones. Stuff like stationary turrets, mines, and even dedicated digging machines...

Will players get to attach their brain pod to a robot, Krang-style, and walk around screaming, “Shredder, get me those turtles!”? Sorry, channeling TMNT. But seriously, will there be situations where you have to maneuver the brain pod itself through danger?

Heh, there’s actually a game mechanic we’re working on where you can swap out the head of any capable robot with your brain pod, then carry it around. This explains how the brains get into their bunkers, and will make for a lot of fun gameplay scenarios where, for example, you might have to evacuate your own brain if the place is being overrun. There will even be specialized robot bodies which are better at protecting and sustaining the brain when on the move.

One of the few games out there that expects you to go brain-dead while playing! Thanks for your time, Dan, and best of luck with Cortex Command going forward.



The Endless Forest

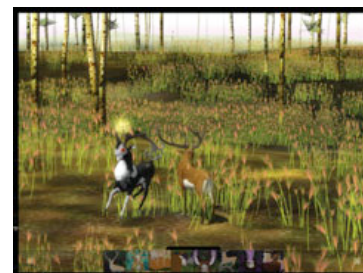
If a deer calls in the forest...

words Mike Griffin

the Endless Forest is the obscure, ever evolving work of artists Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn. It is a multiplayer online game with no chatting, no loot to gather, and no levels to gain, yet it’s always progressive, one hoof fall at a time. And it’s ever so peaceful.

In The Endless Forest, your 3-D avatar is a deer with a human face. Its shape, stoic expressions, and blinking eyes recall the wise woodland creatures of a Miyazaki film, as do the themes at play here: our ancient relationship with nature; how the epic distance between you and another person can be erased in one wordless gesture.

The Endless Forest itself is an unlimited, procedurally generated landscape of idyllic woods, ruins, valleys, and lakes. Guided by the abiogenesis system, it is a world where flowers grow, rain falls, and life evolves. New players can start out as baby fawns, able to summon a weaker version of the forest magic that full-grown deer will later discover. As you travel through the wilderness, you’ll encounter other player creatures who can be interacted with in several ways: Leave your scent on a nearby tree, cuddle with them, dance, laugh, challenge, and protest. Every action communicates your intent and subtly calls upon the winds of magic, gradually evolving your deer over the course of days and weeks. It’s also a fascinating social experiment, to observe reciprocating actions from other deer and how players interpret one another’s posturing—



sometimes with unexpected results.

One day our great-great-grandkids will don some kind of full-sensory apparatus, probably interfaced directly with the brain, and they’ll be able to select from a library of hundreds of virtual experiences, all of them utterly photo-realistic, accurately scented, equipped with epidermal feedback. Skydiving, partying with celebs—you name it. One of them might be “Explore unspoiled nature as a deer.” Perhaps the authors will mention The Endless Forest in the credits, inspiration from a time when humans didn’t have to imagine magical, untainted forests, but still did anyway.

The Endless Forest

System(s)	PC
Developer	Tale of Tales
Publisher	Tale of Tales
Online/Multi	Persistent online
Available	Now

preview



ask alienware

no. 023 // june 2008



Summer is here, and it's a season that can transform your poorly ventilated PC into a barbecue. We discuss whether air cooling is enough to cool your chips, explore the benefits of high-end sound cards, and tackle pressing Vista inquiries.

q. Is it possible to have a really high-end gaming desktop that *isn't* water-cooled? I mean, nowadays with NVIDIA 3-way, ATI multi-CrossFire, companies like ASUS announcing triple ATI GPU video cards, not to mention smokin' multi-core CPUs...it must be like a volcano in there, right? How can air cooling handle all that?



Alienware: Actually, between CPUs utilizing new processor technologies such as Intel's 45nm architecture and AMD shrinking their architecture, CPU thermals have reduced. From a temperature-to-performance standpoint, systems are running cooler than prior generations. This makes it easier to maintain your system with air cooling, even during high-end gaming. If you're looking to overclock your CPU, however, liquid cooling should still be strongly considered.

As far as graphics go, current-day GPU temperatures are running almost twice as cool as previous-generation solutions. This means you can reasonably run both NVIDIA 3-way and Quad SLI, as well as ATI CrossFireX multi-GPU configurations without liquid cooling. So to answer your question, yes, you can build a high-end gaming desktop based entirely around air cooling. It's even possible to run an overclocked system that is air-cooled, but if you're overclocking to extreme frequencies, you will need liquid cooling.



q. There are sound cards out there that include significantly more on-board memory than the norm, such as the 64 MB edition of the X-Fi card. Are PC games actually capable of using the extra hardware sound memory through Windows, or is it merely a pretty-looking spec?



Alienware: The additional memory housed on sound cards such as the X-Fi card does increase system performance by off-loading all audio rendering duties from the CPU. By placing the memory on the sound card, you conserve both system memory and processor bandwidth.

q. Vista adoption is way up, but XP still makes up over 75 percent of the OS market. There is now a large online petition signed by over 100,000 people asking Microsoft to keep Windows XP as an active, updated product beyond its scheduled June 30 retirement. Why do you think XP continues to resonate with PC users, and will this phenomenon curb the development of DX 10 games?



Alienware: With any new operating system, you can expect a certain number of bugs and small software issues. This applies to all new programs and not just operating systems. Microsoft has released Service Pack 1, which addresses the majority of these bugs. As these issues are resolved and more people become familiar with Windows Vista, you can expect to see Vista adoption take off. Keep in mind that while XP resonates with users now, at the time of launch there were an equal number of bugs. Until Vista adoption takes off, you

will see a slight curbing in the development of DirectX 10 games, but this should only be a short-term phenomenon. Over the long term, DX 10 game production will rise alongside Vista adoption.

q. If you had to pick the top three tweaks a person can perform in Windows Vista to make it run smoother and faster, what are your recommendations?

Alienware: If you are experiencing performance issues with Windows Vista, the ideal solution is to upgrade your PC. It's the perfect excuse, isn't it? If you are not able to upgrade your PC at this time, here are three simple fixes to increase system performance.

- 1) Disable the sidebar. The sidebar features that appear on the desktop leach memory and system resources, taking away from any other applications you may be using.
- 2) Turn off Aero Glass. While Aero Glass does give you a better-looking Vista experience, if you are willing to sacrifice the enhanced visuals, turning off Aero Glass will free up vital system resources.
- 3) Reduce the number of applications you have both running in the background and tied to system boot-up. This will speed up boot times, plus as more applications run in the background, fewer resources are available for the programs you want to use.

q. My new HDTV includes a wonderful PC input that I use to output my laptop's video feed, and recently I was re-introduced to PC gaming via WoW (aka virtual crack!); it looks outstanding in full HD. I'd love to see some of the new stuff like Crysis on my

"...if you are willing to sacrifice the enhanced visuals, turning off Aero Glass will free up vital system resources."

big, beautiful flat panel. Do any notebooks have the gonads to run Crysis in 1080p (and I'm talking with nice-looking settings), or is that a little unrealistic?

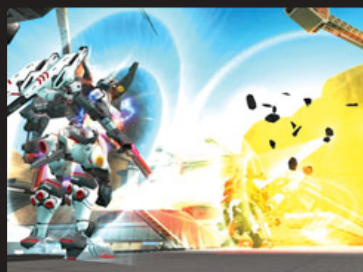


Alienware: Running Crysis at 1080p is a stressful task for any notebook. Fortunately, this is what Alienware notebooks are built for. The Area-51 m15x for example, a 15.4-inch notebook, features an HDMI output that communicates seamlessly with the HDMI input on your high-def television. This means you can output games or any other video content from your Area-51 m15x directly to your HD TV. The Area-51 m15x actually supports up to 1200p resolution at 1920x1200, so running Crysis at 1080p will still fall under the maximum this notebook supports. Running Crysis, even with the settings cranked up to the max, is absolutely realistic.



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts, regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bit rates and firewalls, send them along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free one-year subscription, so don't be shy!

Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest products.



Exteel: Finally ready to bust a cap

n Csoft's extremely lengthy localization of Exteel, its mecha-licious multiplayer action shooter, is finally complete. On the bright side, all this time in the shop has yielded extensive tutorial modes and deep plans for Exteel's micro-transaction system using NC Coin, NCsoft's virtual currency. This means you can try Exteel for free, test its many combat operations, level up, and battle using everything from submachine guns to katana blades. On the other hand, the long porting process has Exteel's already aging engine (an Unreal 2 mod) looking even rustier these days. A clean futuristic aesthetic and plenty of stylish attack moves and weapon effects help to pick up the slack, and chances are your current PC will provide a blistering frame rate in Exteel—a compelling prospect when dodging king-size missiles. Give it a shot today.



Instant Action rolls out the goods

browser-based 3-D action games are all the rage these days, and few online hubs are doing it as well as GarageGames'

Instant Action, currently hosting its beta at instantaction.com. Signing up to Instant Action includes a host of features any gamer would expect, such as lobbies and friends lists, and you'll be able to immediately play several high-quality casual hits, like Marble Blast and Think Tanks. We spent a great deal of time with the new arrival Rokkitball, a wonderfully accessible mix of jetpacks, basketball, and rocket arena.

If you play big-name multiplayer shooters like Call of Duty 4 and Team Fortress 2 on a regular basis, you may be the type of gamer still waiting for Instant Action's killer app. Enter Fallen Empire: Legions, GarageGames' modern-day Tribes revival. And they're permitted to brandish the spiritual successor badge, as the core team here is loaded with ex-Dynamix veterans from the peak of Sierra's classic era, creators of the beloved Tribes games. This is where 3-D shooter fans received their first taste of refined jetpack physics.

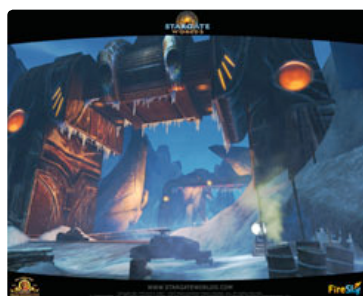
That sky-blazing action and the familiar rhythm of "skating" across landscapes, up and down hillsides on

a cushion of carefully administered thrusters, is immediately apparent in Fallen Empire: Legions. And while the shader and rendering grade isn't overly taxing in this case, FEL nonetheless deserves praise for its clearly optimized, fast-running engine. Though we'd like to see interface improvements and the addition of a few inspired 16- or 24-player team maps, Fallen Empire: Legions is well on its way to becoming Instant Action's prime player magnet.



Rokkitball

Fallen Empire: Legions



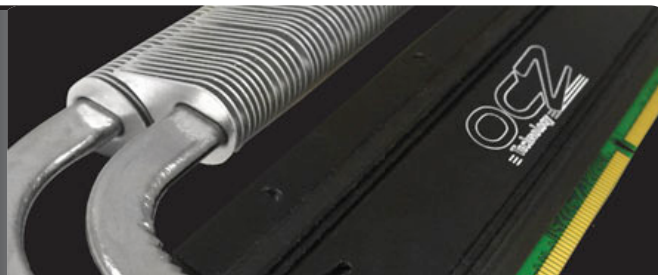
June 2008

Year to date Top 10 Selling PC Games

01	World of Warcraft	Vivendi
02	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	Activision
03	The Sims 2 Freetime Expansion Pack	EA
04	World of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Vivendi
05	World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade Expansion Pack	Vivendi
06	15000 Games	Viva Media
07	Sins of a Solar Empire	Stardock
08	The Sims 2 Deluxe	EA
09	Sim City 4	EA
10	Diner Dash JC	Cosmi



Does your dog bite?



OCZ offers the high density ReaperX series with advanced cooling for high speeds and overclocking

OCZ answers what gamers want to know most about their PC memory

OCZ Technology, an expert in tweaking and squeezing every ounce of performance out of RAM, has been a leader in the memory market since 2002. Founded by gamers for gamers, OCZ has since been on a mission to deliver the very best PC gaming products to the masses.

OCZ Memory Expert and Overclocking Guru, Tony Leach, takes some time away from the forums to answer some questions about RAM and gaming.

q. When I buy RAM for my gaming system, what should I look for?

OCZ: All memory is not created equal and OCZ knows there is more to RAM than megabytes. PC games are requiring increased memory density at high-speed (MHz) and low-latency (timings). For Blu-ray and DirectX 10/10.1-based games, this can greatly decrease load times as well as enhance the visual experience of the game. In the end, memory for a gaming system should fulfill the needs of the games that will be played and most of all be dependable.

q. How do memory latency timings affect my gaming?

OCZ: Low latency memory enhances the read/write and copy speeds of the memory as well as increases available memory bandwidth; this in turn means greater FPS (frames per second) are generated. With the system fully optimized it may be possible to add more eye candy or move up to the next resolution to increase the

visual quality of the game.

q. How much RAM do I need for the latest games?

OCZ: Realistically 4GB of memory is the minimum, especially using Vista™ which uses more system memory just to operate the OS alone. Load times are greatly reduced if the game does not have to continually access the hard drive. Overall systems just feel much "snappier" with 4GB in place.

q. I've heard of overclocking RAM, but it doesn't sound safe. How would I go about doing it right?

OCZ: Overclocking memory generally enhances the whole system's performance. If frequency and latency are enhanced, bandwidth to the processor is increased; this means no information bottleneck occurs and maximum FPS are generated. When overclocking any component, cooling is the number one priority. Keep components cool and they will serve you well! Remember, OCZ is here to help with a dedicated forum www.ocztechnologyforum.com with experts who overclock and test systems all day, every day...if you have any issues just drop by :-)

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Blue Dragon

It may give you the blues

words Dave Hlaverson

"Did they know this was adapted from an Xbox 360 RPG? Because they've managed to alienate that entire audience..."

think somebody missed a memo. Blue Dragon was an Xbox 360 RPG, making the average player at least 16; although given its traditional Japanese RPG roots it was probably more like 18-35. Also, anyone that watches Cartoon Network knows it's heady stuff: *Ed*, *Edd n Eddy*, *Billy and*

Mandy, *Camp Lazlo*... They're all stoner cartoons. Their kid stuff is crazier than the *Swim* stuff. So why is the localization of *Blue Dragon* clearly produced for 7-10 year olds, if that? Somewhere deep in the bowels of some creepy studio they take perfectly good Japanese cartoons and put them through a sterilization sequence by way of tacking-on opening and ending themes that sound like old Partridge Family songs, and sending electric shocks through 20-something actors to make them sound like agitated little kids. *Blue Dragon* is their latest victim. Did they know this was adapted from an Xbox 360 RPG? Because they've managed to alienate that entire audience. Not that it matters. Anyone over the age of 10 will flip it off after the story narrative (which has been butchered to protect the innocent). The reason we're gathered here today? Well, you see, a great light was cast and created everything and peace filled the universe. But humans wanted more—they desired darkness as well (oooooh!). Their wish was granted and darkness came and they all turned bad. And so champions of the light rose up and it beat up the dark (yay!). But now the darkness is back! Oh no! Enter Lord Nene: he's an ugly one but he's doing just fine. He has a huge lair, a gigantic army...but for whatever reason he wants to rule the world, even though it's made up of a few villages full of peasants and a kingdom that will likely give him headaches. Why is it that bad guys who want to take over the world are always ugly by the way? Lord Nene isn't just ugly, he's purple too! Anyway, he wants it (the world) so he sends his armies to steal children so that he can convert them to the dark side and I guess have them do the cleaning or something. Meanwhile Shu (the once cool videogame hero who's now a bratty 10 year old boy with a 40 year old woman's voice) wants to be a Knight Master. Lucky for him Zola and Jiro are in town looking for a mysterious power. Cutting to the chase, the bad guys invade and Zola and the evil general's shadows grow into huge beasts and go at it, causing an avalanche. Shu throws himself into the path of the falling rocks to save his friends and, Houston, we have ignition: his shadow turns into the Blue Dragon. Guess he'll be going home with Zola. Cue the worst ending theme in the known universe. That's episode one. Sorry folks. No sign of the games storyline or sensibilities. Before you throw yourself out the window, it looks amazing. High production quality, crystal clear Toriyama character designs, epic battles, good CGI...it's a beautiful show. Somewhere the original Japanese version is lurking, waiting for a proper localization. I hope that day comes.

Blue Dragon Episode 1

Released By	VIZ Media
Rating	TV G
ETA	Airing on Cartoon Network Sat. mornings at 9:00 and 10:00

review

IN THE BATTLE BETWEEN MACHINE AND MAN HUMANITY STANDS TO SUFFER MOST



VEXILLE

ON DVD 05.20.08

FROM THE CREATORS OF APPLESEED

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Buso Renkin

These tricks aren't for kids

words Bill Gray

I don't know what it is about anime, but give me a good plot where the hero has to train and fight to unlock his hidden powers and eventually triumph over unspeakable evil and I get suckered in every time. The plotline is as old as *Speed Racer*—and I'm not talking about the Wachowski brothers' version—but is distilled and refined into an enormously addictive anime formula in *Buso Renkin* from Viz Media.

Like a spiky-headed Tin Man, Kazuki Mito literally has no heart. Staying late at his high school one night, Kazuki had the misfortune of stumbling upon a scene between a strange, half-snake, half-human monster and a young girl in a high school uniform. Upon rushing out to save her, the snake-thing impaled him on a spike and left him for dead.

As luck would have it, Tokiko (the girl he tried to rescue) happened to be an alchemist warrior, a group dedicated to fighting homunculi. Homunculi are half-human, half-animal (or plant) hybrids that spend their time killing and

eating regular people. Tokiko revives poor Kazuki by planting an artificial heart in his chest. That is, of course, if an artificial heart looked like a stone hexagon with Roman numerals on it.

The hexagon heart also gives Kazuki the power to pull an enormous sword capable of killing homunculi out of his chest. With Tokiko's help, Kazuki must learn to master his Buso Renkin (that's what these weapons are called) to defeat the homunculi and perhaps figure out how to become fully human again.

Buso Renkin graduated from the *Naruto-Pokemon* school of anime (or *Naru-Poke*, as kids these days call it), where a young boy slowly grows stronger and stronger as he learns about himself and his own powers. More mature than those two shows, *Renkin* balances its scenes of brutal violence with some lighter moments, usually at the expense of the cocky Kazuki. And in the character of Tokiko, we have perhaps the only anime character ever to use her hips as lethal weapons.

Despite the somewhat predictable plot, *Renkin* is highly addictive, almost like a

good JRPG. Viz's handsome three-disc set was a lifesaver for me, as it meant that I could watch a good chunk of the show's episodes all at once. The box set lacks significant extra features, with just a featurette and audio commentary added, making the series redundant for those who have the DVDs, but convenient for newcomers to the series. And couldn't Viz have put all 24 episodes in the set, rather than splitting the show into two box sets. Doesn't that defeat the point of a box set in the first place?

Buso Renkin

Released By	Viz Media
Volume	Box Set 1
Running Time	Approx. 300 mins
Episodes	13
Rating	TV-MA
Available	Now

review

"The plotline is as old as *Speed Racer*—and I'm not talking about the Wachowski brothers' version..."

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Azumi 2

Movie: B-

Directed by: Shusuke Kaneko

Starring: Aya Ueto, Chiaki Yuriyama, Shun Oguri, Mikijiro Hira

Released By: Urban Vision

Rated: Not Rated

I really enjoyed the original *Azumi*; it was fun, had some great action, and as I said when I reviewed it, I never tire of watching cute Japanese girls slice a fool or two. So when a sequel was announced—featuring my girl Chiaki Yuriyama no less—I hoped Urban Vision would once again do the right thing. My excitement wasn't hampered by the rumblings I had heard that *Azumi 2* wasn't quite on par with its previous chapter, but unfortunately that is indeed the case. The problem is director Shusuke Kaneko just couldn't match what Ryuhei Kitamura gave

us last time around; *Azumi 2* had all of the potential of the original film, but simply didn't have Azumi's passion in bringing said potential to fruition. Combine that with the fact that this is a continuation of and conclusion to the events of the first movie, and you've got a film that is hard to recommend if watched on its own. If this would be your introduction to Aya Ueto in the role of sword-swinging manga heroine Azumi, to really appreciate the good that *Azumi 2* has to offer, do yourself a favor and track down a copy of her debut outing first. *-Eric Patterson*



The Nines

Movie: B+

Directed by: John August

Starring: Ryan Reynolds, Hope Davis

Released By: Sony Pictures

Rated: R



I've seen *The Nines* maybe one too many times in the past couple months, attempting to introduce friends to a movie I find immensely enjoyable in that same way the cult followers get a kick from, say, a *Donnie Darko*. No one seems to even know of the film's existence, which is a real shame given that some of you will walk away in love with its sly, peculiar and at times wonderfully entertaining commentary on our inflated, godlike souls. It would be unfair to even hint of its secrets, but it should be noted that the

film revolves around a character who in one life, plays games, and in another, is a game designer (Ryan Reynolds's performance will surprise you), which filters very intriguingly into the final stretch of an ending you will either laugh away as cheap and ludicrous or find intoxicating. *The Nines* was directed by John August, his first time behind the camera, previously assuming writing duties on another favorite of mine, *Big Fish*. Yes, this can be an overcooked, hit-and-miss film at times, but if I were passing the initial judgement, I see the vision, I see the nines... *-Brady Fiechter*



Diary of the Dead

Movie: B-

Director by: George A. Romero

Starring: Michelle Morgan, Josh Close, Shawn Roberts

Released By: Weinstein Company

Rated: R

George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead* turned off plenty of his biggest fans, and those same fans are probably going to find equal angst for the smaller scale *Diary of the Dead*. I can see how viewers are becoming weary of another zombie movie that continues to play off the same themes of Romero's classic series when it was indeed at its gory best, but there's something so raw and biting about the way this peerless director approaches the material. Here it's bordering on the cheap side of filmmaking, and despite some unconvincing actors and

effects, there's no less delicious sense of dread and metaphor to satisfy in *Diary of the Dead*. *-Brady Fiechter*



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BACK OF THE BOOK

Blah, blah, blah



06.08 CASEY LOE
EDITOR

Dear Game Publishers,

Please stop spending hundreds of thousands of dollars making demos that convince me not to buy your games.

A study presented at a game marketing conference in April launched an Internet firestorm when it suggested that, in terms of promoting games, downloadable demos do more harm than good. The study's methodology merely tallied the sales of games with and without demos, which proves little—publishers are more likely to make demos for new franchises than established ones like Halo and Call of Duty—so the study hardly demonstrated a cause-and-effect relationship. That said, I'm starting to get the feeling that the authors may be on to something, because over the last several months, downloadable demos have killed my enthusiasm for more games than they've convinced me to buy. I don't have any fancy charts or graphs to prove my point, but I'm fairly confident in my final conclusion: Any developer who puts money and effort into making a playable demo should try to make it not suck. There's no way that games like BioShock and Lost Planet would have ever succeeded to the extent that they did without the great demos that were the cornerstone of their marketing campaigns, yet most developers continue to ignore the basic, obvious rules of demo design.

Put your best foot forward. The artists working on Turok clearly devoted a great deal of effort to making the most lush, realistic, interactive jungle environment possible. Why then, did they start their demo with 15 minutes of wandering around in a barren, ugly cave? Sure, you do get out of the cave eventually, but I suspect that a sizable percentage of players never played that far. After all, demos are free, so you aren't invested in them the way you would be after dropping \$60. But at least Turok did finally show you the jungle—most developers tend to save their best stuff for the retail release, which is a noble way of avoiding spoilers but seems like a poor business decision. Were the demo levels used for Uncharted or The Simpsons really among anyone's favorite levels of the final game?

Choose a self-contained chunk of the game. Blue Dragon had a truly awful demo—it consisted of two dungeons taken completely out of context, with overpowered characters and unclear

goals. When all you do in a demo is wander around, button-mash through battles, and open treasure chests full of meaningless items, why wouldn't you assume that's exactly what the final game will be like? More recently, the Japanese demo for Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan! (aka Yakuza 3) was so awful that it completely killed my excitement for a game that actually ended up being an all-time favorite of mine—it's a good thing I had to play it for work, because I never would have bought it otherwise. The demo consisted of a lame fetch quest that, in the context of the final game, only existed to serve as a tutorial. What's frustrating about both of those games is that it would have been easy to pluck out a short chunk of the game that would have made a great demo—Blue Dragon's Alumar Village side quest, (which consists of one town, one dungeon, and one boss with a self-contained story line) would have been a perfect demo. And immediately after that Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan! tutorial section ends, the retail game flashes back to a self-contained flashback with a great story line, a few tutorial battles, and a lengthy action scene that would have made an ideal introduction to the game's new sword-fighting mechanics. Apparently, the developers decided instead to hold that section back as a surprise for players. Well, mission accomplished—you've successfully concealed its existence from the thousands of Japanese people who will never buy the game at all, because you tricked them into believing that it consisted of a series of tedious fetch quests.

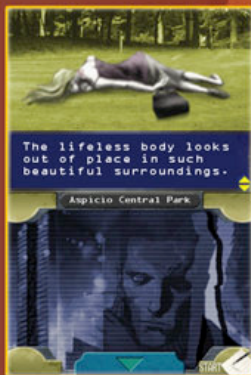
Show some confidence in your product. Heavenly Sword's 60 seconds of playable demo left players intrigued, but perhaps not in the way Sony intended. Instead of wanting more, players were left wondering what exactly the developers were trying to hide. Was the game so short that they considered a single minute to be a sizable percentage of the final product? Was the game so repetitive that they feared we'd grow bored, had it stretched on for another 45 seconds? I know developers are concerned that players will mooch off their hard work for free, but if your demo doesn't show a variety of play mechanics and environments, you force us to assume that it doesn't actually have those things. And while I'm sure that there are plenty of

"More recently, the Japanese demo for Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan! (aka Yakuza 3) was so awful that it completely killed my excitement for a game that actually ended up being an all-time favorite of mine—it's a good thing I had to play it for work, because I never would have bought it otherwise."

cheapskates who have logged 400 hours on the lone demo level of Ninja Gaiden Sigma or Dead Rising without ever buying the finished game, I think it's safe to assume that those sad, pathetic wretches don't actually buy packaged retail games from any publisher other than Burger King.

A year ago, demos looked like the future of gaming. By the year 2007, we assumed that no one would ever drop \$60 without having a good idea of what they were getting into. There would be a demo for everything decent, and the mere absence of a demo would be all we'd need to know about the quality of a game—like movies that aren't screened for critics, it would be a tacit admission from the publisher that their game totally sucked.

Is that still the future? Or have we stumbled upon some quirk of human economic behavior, in which we're happy to spend \$60 on something exciting and unknown while we simultaneously judge free content more harshly because we didn't invest anything into it? I would hate to believe that, so instead, I'm blaming everyone but myself. Let's start making demos the rule, and not the exception, and for fuck's sake, developers—make them good.



Episode 1: *The Petty Murder of a Fragile Heart*

A murder has taken place in Aspicio City's peaceful Central Park. Jake's longtime friend, Detective Scott Kingsley, implores Jake to help solve the case. Can Jake uncover the killer's true motive?

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Episode 3: *Crash and Burn*

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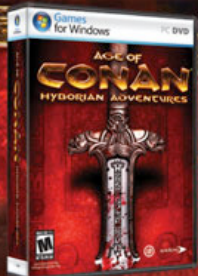
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